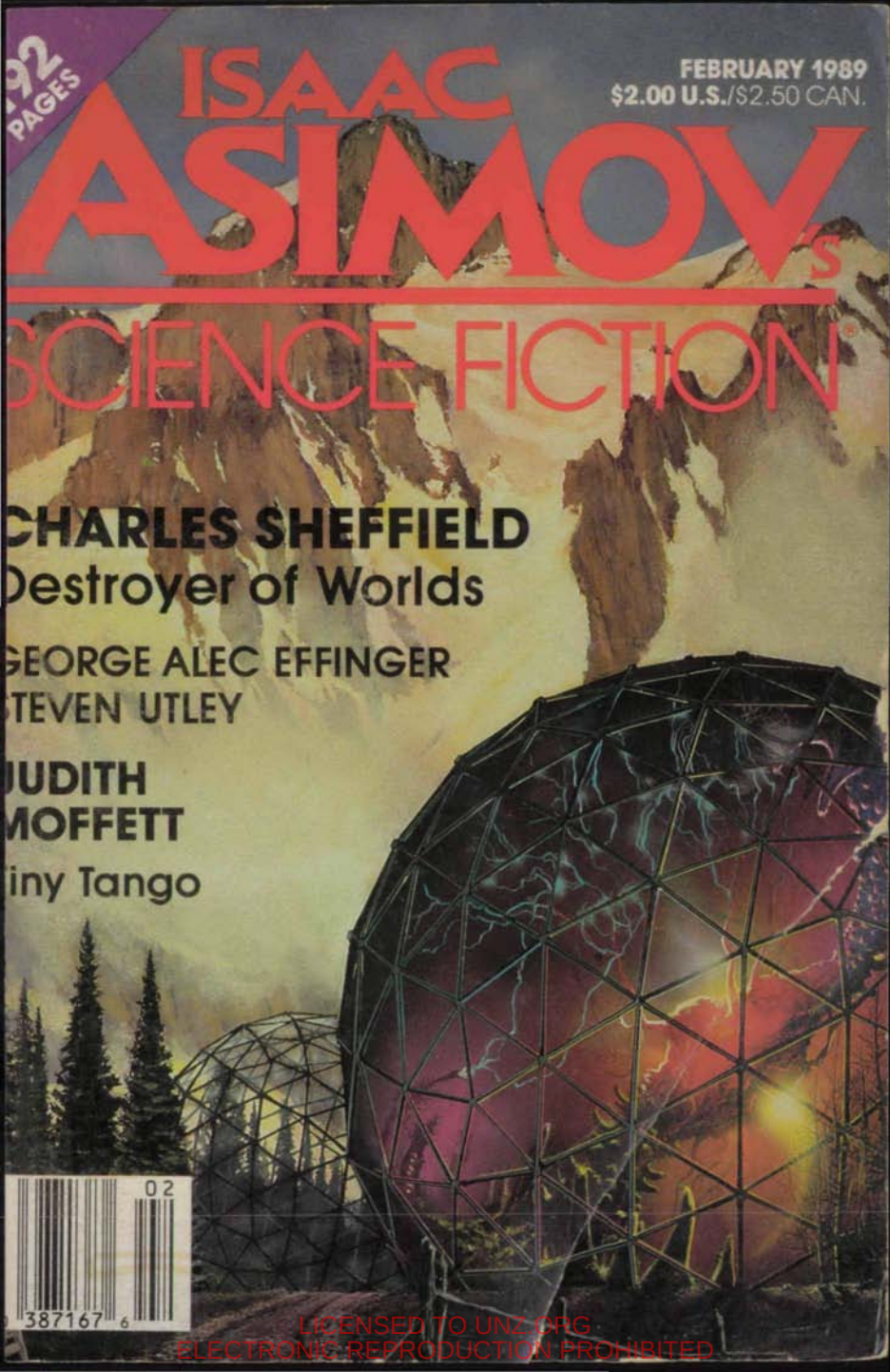

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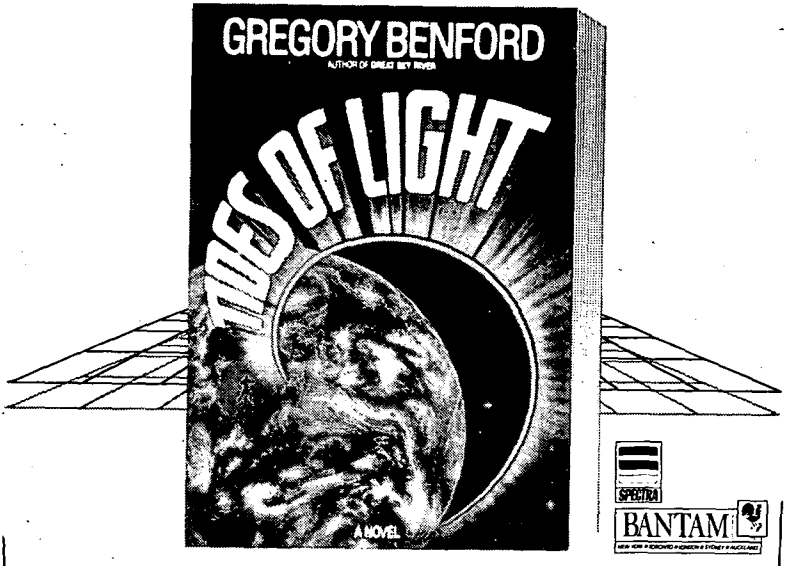

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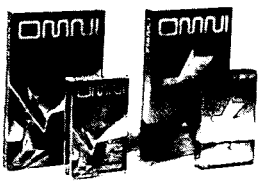

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Vol. 13 No. 2 (Whole Number 140)
February 1989
Next Issue on Sale
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Novellas

16 Tiny Tango — Judith Moffett
140 Destroyer of Worlds — Charles Sheffield

Novelettes

76 Free Beer and the William Casey Society — Allen M. Steele
92 The Oniomancer — Lisa Mason
112 Everything but Honor — George Alec Effinger

Short Story

66 My Wife — Steven Utley

Departments

4 Editorial: Sage — Isaac Asimov
9 Letters
14 Gaming — Matthew J. Costello
184 On Books — Baird Searles
192 The SF Conventional Calendar — Erwin S. Strauss

Cover art for "Destroyer of Worlds" by Nick Jainschigg

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EDITORIAL

SAGE

by Isaac Asimov

As I write these words, I am approaching three golden anniversaries.

On June 21, 1988, I will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the day I first stepped into the office of John Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction,* with the manuscript of the very first story I ever submitted for publication. It was entitled "Cosmic Corkscrew" and Mr. Campbell rejected it. It was one of the eight stories I wrote in those early days that was never published, and it is now lost forever, thank whatever gods may be.

When I mentioned this fact to Stanley Schmidt, the revered editor of *Analog,* who now occupies the seat once held by Campbell, he said, "Will you be coming in to the office on June 21, 1988?" I said, "Since I come in every Tuesday morning and June 21, 1988 is on a Tuesday, yes, I will."

Whereupon Stan said, "Of course, you will celebrate by bringing in another submission on the golden anniversary."

I said, "All right, if you insist—but Campbell rejected the submission I brought him fifty years ago."

"I'm not likely to repeat that come June," said Stan.

Okay, but if, after reading it, he decides to reject it, he can console himself with the thought that it is not till October 21, 1988 that I will be celebrating the golden anniversary of my first sale. It was on October 21, 1938 that I received a check for $64 from *Amazing Stories* for my story "Marooned Off Vesta."

By the time this editorial appears, those two anniversaries —first submission and first sale—will have passed. However, nearly upon us will be the third and perhaps most significant anniversary, for on January 9, 1989, I will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of my first appearance in a science fiction magazine, for "Marooned Off Vesta" was included in the March 1939 issue of *Amazing Stories* and that reached my father's newsstand on January 9, 1939.

Do these anniversaries make me feel old? I guess they do. You can't be a professional writer for fifty years without, at best, being within hailing distance of that big three-

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score years and ten. And it's hailing me with a big smile on its face. —But it's no use my repining. The only sensible reaction I can have is to hope I make it.

And of course, sheer length of professional life has converted me into a sort of monument. I notice that young men greet me with visible awe and sort of bow and scrape and grope for words—which makes me feel a little impatient because I am the same brash child prodigy I was fifty years ago, and I don't *want* to be a monument.

Fortunately, it's only the young men who treat me so. Young women detect the gleam in my aged eyes, and in a minute or two they are giggling exactly as their mothers did half a lifetime ago.

Being a monument isn't the worst of it, though. To be a monument, you simply stand still and don't do anything.

The trouble is that people have begun to think of me as a source of wisdom for no other reason than that I have been around for as long as they can remember.

My friend, Ben Bova, once said to me, when I complained about this, "You can do nothing about it, Isaac. You have become a sage."

Except that I desperately don't want to be a sage. The responsibility is too great.

Only today (as I write) I received a letter from a gentleman who is putting together a book of wise sayings by wise men and so of course he is writing to a great many wise men asking them to say something

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wise that he may quote. And I was included on his list.

I answered more or less like this, "I am terribly sorry but I really am trying to resist the temptation of behaving as though I were a sage. If you were to look through my writings and find a passage or two in which, in your opinion, I have sounded wise—well, fine. But for me to sit here and make up something and offer it to you as a piece of wisdom is just too risky. I may be doing nothing more than offering you a piece of darned foolishness."

All I can do is hope that he takes that comment in the same friendly way that I offered it. I can't be sure of that because some people react very savagely.

Someone was once putting together a book that consisted of essays by famous people concerning their fathers, and they wrote and asked me to do one. Actually, I had written an essay about my father, whom I greatly admired despite his eccentricities, and published it, too, and I didn't feel like writing another. However, when I wrote to the author, refusing, I also said, perhaps injudiciously, that it struck me that very few people (especially famous people) would write honest evaluations of their fathers and that the book as a whole would be so saccharine it would probably give its readers diabetes.

I won't quote the answer I got. It was absolutely vicious. But perhaps I could have been more tactful.

And, of course (and I may have complained about this before), grade-school teachers are forever urging their young charges to write to me and ask me the same tired questions: "How old were you when you first wrote a story?" "What made you decide to write science fiction?" "Do you intend to write another book?" What it amounts to is that the teacher is assigning me homework.

Most authors have secretaries who send off form replies to such things—but I don't have a secretary and I get so *tired* trying to reply to them all. So once I wrote, rather testily, that really couldn't the teacher ask her students *not* to bother me. The teacher promptly sent my letter to some local newspaper columnist who printed it with remarks about what a mean old curmudgeon I was, and I started getting angry letters from perfect strangers.

Sometimes the teacher decides that he (or she) simply can't energize and inspire the youngsters he is teaching. I therefore get a letter asking me, as a certified sage, to write something addressed to the class that would inspire them. In short, I am asked to do the teacher's work but I am not offered part of the teacher's salary. After complying countless times, I finally rebelled and wrote a teacher that, really, I had so many requests of this kind, that I had to refuse writing inspirational letters in order to preserve my sanity. I promptly got

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an answer to the effect that I ought to be ashamed of myself.

The point I am making is that it is hard work being a sage. Unlimited demands are made on your time, and zero recompense is offered. And if you refuse the deal, you are vilified.

What do I do? Easy! I have simply stopped answering such letters. As far as the senders are concerned, they have dropped into a black hole called my wastebasket.

It's not just teachers and strangers that try to exploit anyone they consider a sage. The word has got around that I know everything and that nothing is so obscure and outré that I don't know the answer. Well, sometimes I have to reply that I really *don't* know the answer, and then I have the uncomfortable feeling that they don't believe me and think I won't give them an answer just to be nasty.

But sometimes I *do* know. Recently, a young man who defined himself as a member of the Science Fiction Writers of America needed a particular quote from the Bible for a book he was writing. He gave me the quote, but said he couldn't find it in the Bible though he had searched assiduously.

The trouble was that he had the quotation wrong, but I could tell what the correct quotation was from what he had given me, and—noblesse oblige—since I take the brotherhood of science fiction seriously, I looked up the correct quote and sent him that *and* the Biblical citation by return mail.

Now this young man had gone to the great trouble of writing a letter to ask me to help. Having received that help, would it be possible for him to take a little additional trouble to write me another letter saying, "Thank you"?

You know the answer. He didn't. Leaving old and personal friends out of account, I have never given a stranger information that he requested and received a thank-you note in exchange.

Don't get me wrong. I don't expect one. Do you suppose any ancient Greek wrote a thank-you note to the Delphic Oracle? Sages are there to be used, not to be thanked.

But then, on occasion—

On April 23, 1988, Davis Publications had its second annual awards party, with various contributors to *Asimov's* and *Analog* getting awards because readers voted their stories best of the year.

In the novella category, the winner was Kim Stanley Robinson for his masterly "Mother Goddess of the World" which appeared in the October, 1987 *Asimov's*. Robinson, in accepting the award, concluded by saying, "I also thank the person whose science fiction introduced me to the field and who has been a continuing inspiration ever since—Isaac Asimov."

And I waved and yelled and shouted and decided that being a monument and a sage had its points after all. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I disliked the posthumous story "The Earth Doth Like A Snake Renew," by James Tiptree, in the May edition. It's what I'd call a tease, meaning a story that goes nowhere, and keeps promising you some sex to make you read on. At least its ending was interesting and unexpected; I can hardly say the same for your "George and Azazel" stories. For a good, cautionary tale about getting what you want, try W.W. Jacob's "The Monkey's Paw." I dislike one-liners posing as short stories.

Part of my dislike stems from the fact that you can (and Tiptree could) do so much better. Your descriptions of the ship's-pilot computer in *Foundation's Edge,* and the love scene between three triad-beings in *The Gods Themselves,* were so powerful and inventive that they cannot be improved upon. It's writing like that that I look for—and usually find—in *IAsfm.*

There's nothing really noteworthy about a teenage girl's fantasy of mating with a god or giant. I had fantasies like that myself. When you grow a very little older, you realize that gods are boring, compared with people. Remember, people invented them.

My belief is that Tiptree didn't publish the story because she knew it wasn't good enough. While it may have been a coup for *IAsfm,* it wasn't nearly so good a story as "The Hob," or "The Queen of Day," both published in the same issue.

Sincerely,

Nina A. Schwartz
Alexandria, VA

I suppose I can never repeat often enough that my George and Azazel stories are not intended to be deep, philosophical things. They are pieces of fluff. I like to write fluff now and then, and some people like to read fluff now and then. Besides, it makes all the deep stuff in the magazine seem so much deeper by comparison.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac (with 2 as and 1 s),

I've decided to tell you and your able staff how much I like your magazine. Though I have been tempted to write before (like after that luscious editorial "Armies of the Night"), I've put it off for fear of gushing to the point of causing stomach upsets.

Being of fairly sane mind at the moment, I thought it safe to heap a few praises upon your tasteful collective heads. First, I thought you had hit the top when Shawna took over as editor. I was wrong.

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I was afraid that Gardner would not live up to Shawna, I was wrong. He is (this is incredible) even better.

Second, don't ever stop writing those, what is the word? eloquent editorials. And yes, that is the word, "persuasive, fluent, and graceful in discourse. Vividly or movingly expressive." You, Good Doctor, do it so very well.

For all of us who nod our heads and say, OH YEAH when we read what you have written, for all of us who cannot be so eloquent, I thank you, Dr. Asimov, for being our spokesperson.

With Deep Admiration,

Arlys Brower
Worthington, MN

Well, thank you. My editorials are intended to express my feelings and I must say that no one at Davis has ever tried to censor what I say or to influence me. Some of my opinions are bound to offend some people but that's the price we pay for living in a free country.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Searles:

I am writing to thank you. You had recommended the book *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Le Guin. The next time I came across it I bought it and read it. Actually I devoured it! It was as good as you said. I love bookstores and libraries—but without a little guidance a reader can miss out on so many things.

And that's why I look forward to your reviews. I appreciate it when you mention the classics of the past. I just made a list of the books you said are currently unavailable. (I keep a large list of all kinds of books I want to track down.)

Critics probably get more mean letters than nice—I just wanted you to know that you are appreciated! You have informed me on what books to look out for and have saved my hard earned money more than a few times.

Thank you.

Marlane Chernoff
Union, NJ

Yes, indeed, critics get way *more mean letters than nice—but that's because they pick on authors, who never forget, never forgive, and who are exceedingly articulate. Believe me, I know. I have never forgotten or forgiven a critic in my life.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner:

I enjoyed the March issue; the writing seems to be improving under your command. By the way, Isaac's etymology of *glasnost* wasn't quite correct. The word derives from *glas,* old slavic for *golos,* which means "voice," not "publish." Therefore the verb *glasit'*—"to announce."

A small point.

Best wishes,

Tony Rothman
Princeton, NJ

Well, Tony, I won't go bail for my Russian dictionary. But in the English-to-Russian section it says that "publicity" is "glasnost." In parenthesis it says ("notoriety") which means that glasnost means "unfavorable publicity" and that is what I take it Gorbachev is trying to get;

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frank Soviet admission of news that is not favorable to itself.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner,

For whatever it's worth, I'll put on my Subscriber's Hat to mention how pleased I've been with the magazine lately. Standout stories have been "To Hell With the Stars" by McDevitt, "Winter's Tale" by Willis, and "I Robot: The Movie" by somebody whose name escapes me at the moment. (Bright kid, too; shows a lot of promise.) So much for this unsolicited Consumer Report.

Oh yeah, and I didn't want to forget "He-We-Await" by Waldrop. Any chance of getting part or all of Waldrop's novel, *I, John Mandeville,* in the magazine? (The chapter I heard Waldrop read in Phoenix was keen.) So much for incisive litr'y criticism.

Michael O. Toman
Torrance, CA

I think we can rely on Gardner to have his eye out for anything that looks good.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am a relatively new admirer of yours. My first encounter of your work was the Foundation Trilogy, which I have enjoyed. So I decided to subscribe to your magazine. My first issue was January 1988 and I read it cover to cover without putting it down.

The short story that intrigued me and hit home was "Ado" by Connie Willis. Her concept of the way we are being forced to *censor* everything we read and see because of pro-groups was right on the button. In Canada we are now going through this garbage of *Censorship* which, to me, is exactly what happened in Connie's story. They want videos, movies, and books screened before the general public has the chance to choose what is acceptable for themselves. In the end there will be nothing left to read or see because it may offend some type of group.

I would like to thank Connie Willis for her brilliant writing on the subject and hope that somewhere in the House of Parliament someone has read this story and can see a connection between Bill C-54 and this work of art.

Kimberly Hodichak
Parry Sound, Ontario
Canada

You are perfectly right. It is the essence of censorship that it grows. No matter what standards are set, there are always borderline cases, and no censor can get in trouble by being a little more zealous than usual. So the borderline cases are quashed and a new borderline is set, until finally, nothing but the ultra-orthodox is allowed.

—Isaac Asimov

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ISAAC ASIMOV

PRESENTS

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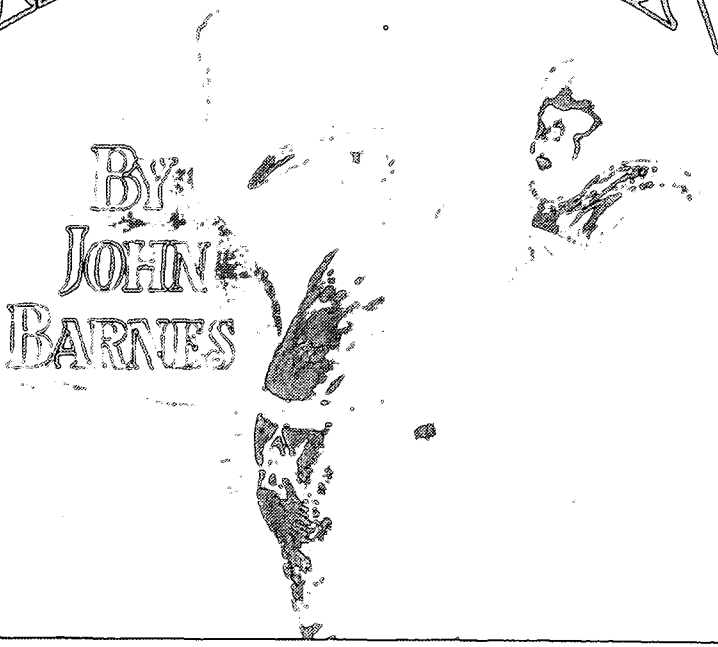

BY JOHN BARNES

"Only the very best science fiction starts arguments, and people will be arguing over this book for many years to come."

--Janet Kagan

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Each year, in the middle of Manhattan's icy, forbidding winter, the International Toy Fair is held. An extravaganza that lasts nearly two weeks, the toy fair draws retail toy and game buyers from all over the world. The large companies, like Milton Bradley, Mattel, and Parker Brothers, set up lavish showrooms as the department store chains and toy shops try to decide what they'll order for the coming Christmas season—a good ten months away.

Part of the fair is held in the huge hall of the Jacob Javits Convention Center. Here, for two days, the companies that don't have a permanent New York office can set up a display and compete with the big boys.

You see the dreamers here.

The people who think they have the next "Trivial Pursuit." Or the next "Rubik's Cube." Loaded with optimism, the people seem unaware that they're dreaming.

Anyone who goes to the fair year after year knows one sobering fact: You hardly ever see the same dreamers two years in a row. They fantasize about coming to the Big Apple with the "next big thing," bring their puzzle or game to New York, take their shot, and then, poorer but wiser, return home.

It's all a bit sad. They just don't see that everyone knows that they're doomed—that their pot of gold isn't around the corner. But there's one fact that keeps the doomsayers in check.

Magic can happen. There were dozens of trivia games before the creators of "Trivial Pursuit" happened to be in the right place at the right time. And Rubik certainly didn't know he was creating a phenomenon. The odds against success are overwhelming, but it can happen. And that's all the chance the dreamers need.

At last year's fair I saw *Zomax* (Zomax, Inc. Box 1005, Sun Valley, Idaho, 83353), the dream of Sun Valley ski instructor Gary Bellinger. And the game looked mighty impressive. It consisted of a large plastic map, standing vertically, that screened each player's moves. The pieces were magnetic and were placed right on the screen.

I saw no more than that, but it was enough to have some hope that here might be someone who had a shot at success.

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After some production difficulties, the game finally was mass produced and arrived in the early summer 1988. Packed in a large black plastic box, Zomax looked splendid. What first appeared to be a variation on the classic game of Battleship was in fact an easy-to-learn yet clever strategy game.

Players place their forces, consisting of planes, tanks, ships, mines, and a capital, on one side of the magnetic map board. Two dice are rolled, and players take turns moving pieces up to the limit of the dice.

For example, on a roll of 7 a player could move one piece seven spaces, or 7 pieces one space (and all the combinations in between). Now, the fun part is that as a piece is moved from space to space it makes any opponent's piece on the opposite side of that space fall off. Once a player's piece has done that, his/her turn is over. And, of course, that attacking piece could likewise be knocked off the board.

The two magnetic maps are divided into an atmospheric display of sea and land. Planes can go anywhere, while boats are restricted to water spaces and tanks to land.

The object of the Zomax is to capture an opponent's capital by magnetically knocking it off the board, not an easy task while avoiding the mines and defensive forces that surround it.

The rules to Zomax can be picked up in five minutes . . . this is no intense simulation game. But as with any good strategy game, there's plenty of room for good planning. A player can get distracted making his own foray onto his opponent's side while his own capital is being surrounded.

How did Gary Bellinger launch his dream?

He got the idea for the board when he saw the vertical magnetic boards used for inventory control in a paper warehouse. Using the principle of opposite magnetic poles repelling each other, he came up with the idea for the strategy game.

After developing a prototype, Gary filed with the Securities Exchange Commission to turn his cottage industry into a publicly-traded stock company. This was approved by the S.E.C., and the company raised capital of $600,000 from the sale of common stock.

The Governor of Idaho (the game rules come with a small map of the US, with Idaho in gray . . . just in case you don't know where it is) offered the services of the Governor's PR office to assist the homegrown game entrepreneur.

Gary Bellinger is calling Zomax "The Greatest Game in the World." And while that's more than a bit of hyperbole, Zomax is an innovative, challenging game . . . one that deserves to be there again, at next year's Toy Fair. ●

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TINY TANGO

by Judith Moffett

Judith Moffett recently received the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Author. Her short fiction has been published in *F&SF* and *IAsfm;* her first novel, *Pennterra,* which was part of our *Isaac Asimov Presents* line, is now available in paperback from Worldwide Library.

art: Janet Aulisio

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I've been encouraged (read: ordered) by my friend, a Hefn called Godfrey, to make this recording. I'm not sure why. It's to be the story of my life, and frankly, a lot of my life's been kind of grim. Godfrey tells me he values the story as an object lesson, but to whom and for what purpose he's not saying. It isn't news anymore that the Hefn don't think like we do.

I made an important choice at twenty-two. Because of that choice I'm alive right now, but I'm still wondering: was it a wise choice, given that the next twenty-five years turned out to be a kind of living death? I hoped that if I did this recording, thought it all through in one piece, I'd be able to answer that question. I need to understand my life better than I do. I'm about to be put to sleep for a long time—forever if things go badly—and I need to know . . . well, what Godfrey thinks *he* knows. What it's meant. What it's all been *for*.

I can't really say that this review has worked, because I still don't think I know. But who can tell? Maybe you listeners in the archive will see something in it I can't see. (Godfrey's betting that you will.)

I recall a certain splendid June morning between the two accidents, mine and Peach Bottom's—a bright, cool morning after a spell of sticky weather. I'd hobbled out to the patio in robe and slippers with my breakfast tray, and loitered over my homegrown whole-grain honey and raisin muffins and strawberry-soy milkshake, browsing through a new copy of *Rodale's Organic Gardening* magazine (featuring an article I'd written, on ways to discourage squirrels in the orchard and corn patch). Then, after a while, I'd taken my cane and gimped out in a leisurely way to inspect the crops. I'd broken an ankle bone that was taking its time about healing; to be forbidden my exercise routines was distressing, but also kind of a relief.

Because the kitchen garden provided my entire supply of vegetables and fruit, my interest in it was like a gardening hobbyist's crossed with a frontier homesteader's. If a crop failed I knew I wouldn't, or needn't, starve. On the other hand, since I never—ever—bought any produce for home consumption, if a crop failed it *would* almost certainly mean doing without something for a whole year. The daily tour of the kitchen garden was therefore always deeply interesting; and if the tour of the field test plots was even more so, theirs was an interestingness of a less intimate type.

Something serious had happened to the Kennebec potatoes; I noticed it at once. Yesterday at dusk the plants had been bushy and green, bent out of their beds on water-filled stalks by last week's storm of rain but healthy, thriving, beginning to put out the tiny flowers that meant I could soon steal a few small tubers from under the mulch to eat with the

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new peas. Now the leaves of several plants were rolled and mottled with yellow. I pulled these up right away, doubting it would do any good, sick at heart as always to see my pampered children fail, however often failure struck them down.

The biggest threat to crops in an organic garden like mine is always disease spread by insects, aphids or leafhoppers in this case, which had all but certainly passed this disease on to other potato plants by now. The mottling and leaf-rolling meant that the bugs—probably aphids, the flightless sort I'd been taught to call "ant cows" in grade school—had infected my Kennebecs with a virus. At least one virus, maybe more. The ants would soon have moved their dairy herd all through the patch, if they hadn't already. Plants still symptom-free would not remain so for long. When Eric showed up I would get him to spray the patch with a Rotenone solution but it was probably too late to save the crop by killing the carriers, the vector. These potatoes already had a virus, incurable and potentially lethal.

I remember that I thought: Well, that makes some more of us then.

I left the heap of infected plants for Eric to cart to the incinerator; they must be not composted but burned, and at once, or there'd be no chance at all of saving the crop and I could look forward to a potatoless year.

Destroy the infected to protect the healthy. The AIDS witch-hunts of the late nineties, the vigilante groups that had broken into testing and treatment facilities all over the country in order to find out who the infected people were, had been acting from a similar principle: identify! destroy! They wanted not just the ones with the acute form of the disease, but also those who'd tested positive to HIV-I, II, and/or III. I'd been lucky; workers in the Task Force office where my records were kept had managed to stand off the mob while a terrified volunteer worked frantically to erase the computer records and two others burned the paper files in the lavatory sink. The police arrived in time to save those brave people, thank God, but in other cities workers were shot and, in that one dreadful incident in St. Louis, barricaded in their building while somebody shattered the window with a firebomb.

My luck hadn't stopped there, no siree. I had the virus right enough, but not—still not, after twenty-five long years—the disease itself. (These two facts have shaped my life. I mean my adult life; I'd just turned twenty-two, and was about to graduate from college in the spring of 1985, when my Western Blot came back positive and everything changed.)

Even the sporadic persecutions ended in 2001, when they got the Lowenfels vaccine. That took care of the general public; but nobody looked for a cure, or expected that a way would ever be found to eliminate the virus from the bodies of those of us who'd already been exposed to it. The best *we* could hope for was a course of treatment to improve our chances

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of not developing full-blown AIDS, at least not for a long, long time. The peptide vaccine that had become the standard therapy by 1994, which worked with the capsid protein in the cells of the virus, was ineffective with too many patients, as were the GMSC factor injections; and zidovudine and its cousins were just too toxic. A lot more research still needed to be done. We hoped that it would be, that we would not be forgotten; but we didn't think it a very realistic hope.

The bone punch, and especially the Green Monkey vaccine which quickly supplanted that radical and rather painful procedure, meant the end of terror for the unsmitten; for the less fortunate it meant at least the end of persecution, as I said, and so for us, too, the day when the mass inoculations began was a great day. A lot of us were also suicidally depressed. Imagine how people crippled from childhood with polio must have felt when they started giving out the Salk vaccine to school kids on those little cubes of sugar, and the cripples had to stand around on their braces and crutches and try to be glad.

It didn't do to think too much about it.

The Test Site clinician who gave me the news had steered me into a chair right afterwards and said, "When the results came in I made you an appointment for tonight with a counselor. She'll help you more than you'd ever believe, and I don't care what other commitments you've got to break: you be there." And he wrote the address and the time on a piece of paper, and I went.

The counselor was a woman in her thirties, sympathetic but tough, and she told me things that evening while I sat and was drenched in wave after icy wave of terror and dread. "We don't know why some people seem to resist the virus better than others, and survive much longer, or why some of those that are AB-positive develop the disease fairly quickly, while others can have a latency period of five or six years," Elizabeth said. "We don't know for sure what triggers the development of the acute disease, if and when it does develop, or what percentage of infected people will eventually develop it.

"But there's a lot of research going on right now into what they call 'cofactors,' variables that may influence the behavior of the virus in individual cases. Cofactors are things like general health, stress levels, life style. We think—we're pretty sure—that it's extremely important for people like you, who've been exposed, to live as healthfully and calmly as you possibly can. The HIV-I virus is linked to the immune system. You get the flu, your immune system kicks in to fight the flu virus, the AIDS virus multiplies; so the trick is to give your immune system as little to do as possible and buy yourself some time.

"Now, what that means in practical terms is: take care of yourself. Get

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lots of sleep and exercise. Don't get overtired or too stressed out. Pay attention to your nutrition. Meditate. Above all, try not to fall into a despairing frame of mind! There's a good chance they'll find an effective treatment in four or five years, and if that happens and you're still symptom-free, you should be able to live a normal life with a normally functioning immune system, so long as you keep up your treatments."

That was the gist of her talk, and some of it sank in. She was wrong about the treatment, of course. In those days everybody expected it would be the vaccine that would prove impossible to make, that a drug to control the course of infection seemed much likelier. We were better off not knowing. Even with treatments to hope for, in those days it was fairly unusual to survive as long as four or five years after infection.

Elizabeth suggested a therapy group of people like myself that I might like to join, a group that had volunteered for a research project being done by a team of psychoneuroimmunologists, though we didn't know that's what they were. They were the hope-givers, that was enough. During the weeks that followed, with help from Elizabeth and the group, I began to work out a plan—to impose my own controls over my situation, in accordance with the research team's wish to explore the effects of an extraordinarily healthful life style on symptom-free HIV-I carriers.

My undergraduate work in biology had been good enough to get me accepted into the graduate program at Cornell with a research assistantship. Until the test results came back I'd been excited by the challenge and the prospect of a change of scene; afterwards, and after a few sessions with Elizabeth and her group, I began instead to feel apprehensive about the effort it would take to learn the ropes of a new department, new university community, new city famous for its six annual months of winter. It seemed better to stick to familiar surroundings and to continue with the same counselor and therapy group. So I made late application to my own university's graduate department and was admitted, and I stayed on: my first major life decision to be altered, the first of many times I was to choose a less challenging and stressful alternative over one that in every other way looked like the more attractive choice.

I'd caught the virus from my major professor; he'd been my only lover, so there could be no doubt of that. While I was still nerving myself up to tell him about the blood test he died in an accident on Interstate 95. Distressingly enough, I'm afraid I felt less grieved than relieved. The death let me off the hook and, more importantly, cleared the way for me to stay, for Bill's presence would have been a difficulty. I'd felt from the first instant that I wanted *no one*, apart from the Task Force people, to know. Not my Fundamentalist family, certainly. Not my friends, from whom I now found myself beginning to withdraw (and since, like me, most of these were graduating seniors, this was easier than it sounds.)

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Overnight my interests had grown utterly remote from theirs. They were full of parties and career plans; I was fighting for my life, and viewed the lot of them from across the chasm of that absolute unlikeness.

I strolled, more or less, through graduate school, working competently without distinguishing myself. I wasn't in a hurry, either. Distinction and rapid progress would have meant a greater commitment and a lot more work, and these were luxuries I could no longer afford, for my first commitment, and first responsibility, now, were to keeping myself alive.

As for how I was to use this life, a picture had gradually begun to form.

First of all it was necessary to divest myself of desire. The yuppiedom I had only recently looked forward to with so much confidence—the dazzling two-career marriage and pair of brilliant children, the house in the suburbs, the cabin in the Poconos and the vacations in Europe—had become, item by item, as unavailable to me as a career in space exploration or ballet. Children, obviously, were out. So was marriage. So, it seemed, was sex in any form; sex had been my nemesis, scarcely discovered before it had blighted me forever. The prestigious high-pressure career in research, which my undergraduate record had made seem a reasonable ambition, had become anything but. I was not after all going to be one of those remarkable professional mothers, making history in the lab, putting in quality time with the kids every day, keeping the lines of communication with my husband open and clear at every level no matter what. I built up the picture of the life I had aspired to for my counselor and my group—and looked at it long and well—and said goodbye to it, as I believed, forever. All that was over.

The next step was to create an alternate picture of a life that *would* be possible. We discussed my abilities and my altered wish list. I toyed briefly with the idea of a career in AIDS research—but AIDS research in the late eighties was about as calm and unstressful a line of work as leading an assault on the North Face of the Eiger in winter, and I had no yearning for martyrdom, then or ever. Through the hours and hours of therapy it emerged that what I wanted most was simple: just to survive, until the other scientists working that field had found a drug that would control the virus and make a normal life possible again. It wasn't hard to work this out in group, because we all wanted the same thing: to hang on until the day—not too far away now—when some hero in a white coat, mounted on a white charger, came galloping up to the fort, holding a beaker of Miracle Formula high like a banner.

But *how* to hang on? For each of us the answer, if different in particulars, was also the same. We wanted to be able to support ourselves (and our families, if we had them) in reasonable comfort, and to keep our antibody status secret. Achieving this, for some of us—the older ones—meant giving up practices in law or medicine, or business careers,

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or staying in but lowering our sights. Some of us quit struggling to save troubled marriages or get custody of children.

For me the obvious course seemed to be a teaching job in an academic backwater, preferably one in that same metropolitan area. Accordingly—at a time in my life when I'd expected to be at Cornell, cultivating a mentor, working with keen zest and keener ambition at my research, developing and pursuing a strategy for landing a classy position at a prestigious eastern university—I quietly looked into the several nearby branch campuses of the Pennsylvania State University Commonwealth Campus System and made a choice.

My personal style altered a lot during graduate school. I'd done some acting in high school and college, and that made it easier—though you mustn't suppose it was *easy*—to put my new persona over by turning down invitations ("too busy") and so on. Before long my department, which had been so delighted to keep me, had lumped me in with that breed of student that fizzles out after a promising undergraduate takeoff, and the rest of the RA's had given up on me too.

My therapy group speedily became my complete social universe. Nobody in the Bio Department could possibly have shared the intensity of common concern *we* shared within what we came to call the Company (after the thing Misery loves best). When as time went by one or another of us would lose the battle for wellness, the rest would push aside our own fears and rally round the ailing boon Companion, doing our best to make the final months as comfortable as we could. That wasn't easy either, let me tell you. But we did it. We were like a church family, all in all to one another. Elizabeth, who had given her life to helping us and the researchers at Graduate Hospital—she was our pastor and our friend, and yet, even so, a little bit of an outsider. When she asked what I meant to do for *fun*—since life could not consist entirely of the elimination of challenges and risks—I could only reply that just staying alive and well seemed like plenty of fun for the present, and think privately that no true Companion would ever need to have *that* explained to him or her.

We never told our real names, not in a quarter of a century, and stubbornly refused all that time to evolve from a collective into an assembly of intimates, but we knew each other inside out.

But to the people in my department, who did know my name, I appeared by the age of twenty-nine to have contracted into a prematurely middle-aged schoolmarmish and spinsterish recluse, and nobody there seemed surprised when I accepted a job for which I was grossly overqualified, teaching basic biology and botany at a two-year branch of the Penn State System, fifteen miles out in the suburbs of Delaware County.

My parents in Denver were also unsurprised. Neither had known how to read between the lines of my decision to stay put rather than go to

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Cornell. To them all college teaching seemed equally prestigious, and equally fantastic. They liked telling their friends about their daughter the future biology professor, but they knew too little about the life I would lead for the particulars to interest them much or invite their judgment. After the first grandchild came they'd been more incurious than ever about my doings, which had seemed less and less real to them anyway ever since I left the church. My new church was the Company, and of this they knew nothing, ever.

My job was a dull one made duller by my refusal to be drawn into the school's social web. But it was tolerable work, adequately paid. I stayed in character as the reliable but lackluster biologist; I did what was necessary, capably, without zest or flair. My pre-tenure years were a balancing act, filled but not overfilled. I prepared and taught my classes, swam a mile or ran five every day, meditated for half an hour each morning and evening, carefully shopped for and cooked my excruciatingly wholesome and balanced meals, and took the train into the city one night a week to meet with the Company, and one afternoon a month for my aptly named gag p24 treatments. Every summer for five years I would spend some leisurely hours in the lab, then sit in my pleasant apartment and compose a solid, economical, careful paper developing one aspect or another of my Ph.D. research, which had dealt with the effects of stress on the immune system in rats. One after another these papers were published in perfectly respectable scientific journals, and were more than enough to satisfy the committee that in due course awarded me tenure.

By the time they had approved me, in the fateful year 1999, my medical records had been destroyed. No document or disk anywhere in the world existed to identify me by name as a symptom-free carrier of the HIV-I virus, though no other personal fact spoke as eloquently about the drab thing I had become.

The fourteen years had thinned the ranks of Companions, but a fair number of us were still around. Just about all of us survivors had faithfully—often fanatically—followed the prescribed fitness/nutrition/stress management regimen, and it was about then that our team of doctors began to congratulate us and each other that we were beating the bejeezus out of the odds. If you're wondering about the lost Companions, whether they too hadn't stuck to the routines and rules, the answer is that they usually *said* they had; but it was easy enough for us to see (or suppose) how this or that variable made their cases different from ours.

I myself hardly ever fell ill, hardly had colds or indigestion, so extremely careful was I of myself. My habits, athletics aside, were those of a fussy old maid—Miss Dove or Eleanor Rigby or W.H. Auden's Miss Edith Gee. They were effective though. When a bug did get through my defenses despite all my care—as some inevitably did, for student popu-

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lations have always harbored colds and flus of the most poisonous volatility—I would promptly put myself to bed and stay there, swallowing aspirins, liquids by the bucket, and one-gram vitamin C tablets, copious supplies of which were always kept on hand. No staggering in with a fever to teach a class through the raging snowstorm—no siree, not on your life. Not this survivor.

After tenure I bought a little house in a pleasant development of modest brick tract homes on half-acre lots near the campus, and settled in for the long haul. For years I'd subscribed to the health magazine *Prevention*, published by the Rodale press; now at last I'd be able to act on their advice to grow my own vegetables instead of buying the toxin-doused produce sold in the supermarkets. I mailed off my subscription to *Organic Gardening*, had the soil tested, bought my first spade, hoe, trowel, and rake, and some organic fertilizers, spaded up a corner of the back yard, and began.

That first post-tenure summer I made a garden and wrote no paper. My mood was reflective but the reflections led nowhere much. The next year of teaching was much the same: I did my job, steered clear of controversy, kept in character. But as the following spring came on—spring of the year 2000—I became restless and vaguely uneasy. Even as I loosened the soil in my raised beds and spread over them the compost I had learned to make, I had dimly begun to know that the cards I'd been playing thus far were played out, that it was time for a new deal.

What I felt, I know now, were the perfectly ordinary first stirrings of a midlife crisis, probably initiated by the "marker event" of successfully securing my means of support for the foreseeable future. Ordinary it may have been, but it scared me badly. Uneasiness is stressful; stress is lethal.

I've stopped to read over what I've written to this point. It all seems true and correct, but it leaves too much out, and I think what it mainly leaves out is the terror. I don't mean the obvious terror of the Terror, the riots of 1998–99, when I might have been killed outright had the mob that stormed the Alternate Test Site on Walnut Street gotten its talons into my file and learned my name, when the Company met for months in church basements kept dark, when threatening phone calls woke Elizabeth night after night and she didn't dare come to meetings because the KKK was shadowing her in hopes of being led to us. I certainly don't deny we were scared to death while that nightmare lasted, but it *was* like a nightmare, born of hysteria and short-lived. In a while, we woke up from it. I'm talking about something else.

It's true that we all know we're going to die. Whether we're crunched by a truck tomorrow while crossing the street, or expire peacefully in our sleep at ninety, we know it'll happen.

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Now, as long as one fate seems no more likely than the other, most people manage to live fairly cheerfully with the awareness that one day they will meet their death for sure. But knowing that your chances of dying young, and soon, and not pleasantly, are many percentage points higher than other people's, changes your viewpoint a lot. Some of the time my radically careful way of life kept the demons at bay, but some of the time I would get up and run my five miles and shower and dress and meditate and drive to school and teach my classes and buy cabbages and oranges at the market and drive home and grade quizzes and meditate and eat supper and go to bed, all in a state of anxiety so intense I could scarcely control it at all.

There were drugs that helped some, but the best were addictive so you couldn't take those too often. The only thing that made years of such profound fear endurable was the Companionship of my fellow travelers. Together we could keep our courage up, we could talk out (or scream or sob out) our helpless rage at the medical establishment as years went by without producing the miracle drugs they'd been more or less promising, that would lift this bane of uncertainty from us and make us like everybody else—mortal, but with equal chances. Now, terror and rage are extremely stressful. Stress is lethal. I had said so over and over in print, my white rats and I had demonstrated it in the lab, statistics of every sort bore out the instinctive conviction that we had more to fear from fear itself than from just about anything else; and so our very terrors terrified us worst of all. But we bore it better together than we possibly could have borne it alone.

A few of my Companions in these miseries took the obvious next step and paired off. One or two probably told each other their real names. I wasn't even tempted. But sexual denial is stressful too; so on Saturday afternoons I used to rent a pornographic video or holo. A lot of these were boring, but trial and error taught me which brands showed some imagination in concept or direction, and voyeurism in that sanitary form did turn me on, it worked, it took care of the problem. Miniaturized in two or three dimensions, the shape-shifting penises of the actors seemed merely fascinating and the spurting semen innocent. No matter that a few spurts of semen had destroyed my life, and that a penis, the only real one I'd ever had to do with, had been the murder weapon; these facts did not feel relevant to the moaning and slurping of the young folks—certified AB-Negatives every one—who provided my weekly turn-on.

For a very long time I was content to release my sexuality, for hygienic reasons, into its narrow run for an hour or so each weekend, like some dangerous animal at the zoo. A few of the guys in the Company were straight, and maybe even willing, but a real relationship—a business as

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steamy and complicated as that—would have been out of the question for me. Others might have the skills; I lacked them. How much safer and less demanding the role of voyeur in the age of electronics, able to fast-forward through the dull bits and play the best ones over!

The Company, directed by Elizabeth, seemed to understand the force of these feelings. At any rate I wasn't pushed to try to overcome them.

Well, as I was saying: the beginning of my thirty-seventh summer, one year after receiving tenure at the two-year college where I seemed doomed to spend the rest of my life, however long that proved to be, and a year after the worst of the rioting ended—the beginning of that summer found me jittery and depressed, and very worried about being jittery and depressed. Probably I wouldn't have acted even so; but at about the same time, or a bit earlier, I'd begun to exhibit a piece of obsessive-compulsive behavior that until then I'd only heard about at Company gatherings: one morning, toweling down after my shower, I caught myself scrutinizing the skin of my thighs and calves for the distinctive purplish blotches of Kaposi's sarcoma, the form of skin cancer, previously rare, whose appearance is a diagnostic sign of the acute form of AIDS.

How long I'd been doing this half-consciously I couldn't have told you, but from that morning I was never entirely free of the behavior. I'd reached an age when my skin had begun to have its share of natural blotches and keratoses, and I gave myself heart failure more times than I can count, thinking some innocent bruise or lesion meant *this was finally it.* After several weeks, growing desperate, I gave up shaving my legs—and shorts and skirts in consequence—and suffered through the hot weather in loose overalls, just to avoid the chronic anxiety of seeing my own skin. I nearly drove myself nuts.

The Company assaulted this symptom with shrewd concern and a certain amount of relish. Your unconscious is trying to tell you something, dummy, one or another of them would say; I used to do that when I got so freaked out in the riots—sloppy about doing my Yoga—too busy chasing the bucks—into a bad way after I lost my mother—upset because I couldn't afford to keep the house but didn't want to sell. Remember when *I* did that? they'd say. Just figure out what you're doing wrong and fix *that,* then you'll be okay. For starters, try deciding whether it's something you need to work into your life, or something you need to get rid of.

I didn't see how it could very well be the latter, since my present life had been stripped to the bare essentials already. But what they said made sense. It was this sort of counsel that made us so necessary to one another.

Elizabeth, moreover, had a concrete suggestion. On her advice I rented

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a condo in the Poconos near the Delaware Water Gap—almost the vacation spot of my former Yuppie dreams—for a couple of weeks. The Appalachian Trail, heavily used in summer unfortunately, passes through the Gap. I spent the two weeks of my private retreat hiking the Trail, canoeing on the river, and assessing the state of my life.

So how was I doing?

Well, on the plus side, *I was still alive.* Half the original Company of sixteen years before, when I'd just come into it, were not, most from having developed the disease, though in a few cases more than a decade after seroconverting. In the early days it had been hoped that if a person with HIV-I antibodies hadn't fallen ill after six or eight years or so he probably never would, but it hadn't turned out like that. So far, the longer we survived, the more of the virus we had in us; to be alive at all after such a long time was pretty remarkable. I tried to feel glad.

I'd chosen a suitable job and fixed things so I could keep it; I'd also managed my money intelligently during the years before getting tenure. My salary, while not great, was adequate for a single person who hardly went anywhere and whose expensive tastes ran to top-of-the-line exercise equipment and holographic projectors. Raises would be regular, I would be able to manage my house payments easily. I'd already bought nearly all the furniture I needed, and had assembled a solid reference library of books, tapes, and disks on nutrition, fitness, stress management, and diseases, especially my own; and the gardening and preserving shelf was getting there. In short, all the details of the plan I had devised for myself sixteen years before were in place. And it had worked out: here I was.

So how come I felt so lousy?

At first, when I tried to tot up the negatives, it was hard to think of any at all. I was alive, wasn't I? Didn't that cancel out all the minuses right there?

As a matter of fact, it didn't. Once I got started the list went on and on.

As a bright college senior I had planned to make something really dazzling and grand of my life. That dream had been aborted; but I began to see that all these years I had been secretly grieving for it as for an aborted child. However obvious this looks now, at the time the recognition was a terrific shock. Years and years had lapsed since my last conscious fantasy of knocking the Cornell Biology Department on its collective ear, and I really believed I had ritualistically said goodbye to all that, early in my therapy.

Just what was it I'd wanted to do after Cornell, apart from becoming rich and famous? I could hardly remember. But after a while (and an hour of stony trail, with magnificent views of New Jersey) I had called back into being a sense of outward-directedness, of largesse bestowed

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upon a grateful world, that differed absolutely from the intense and cautious self-preoccupation which had governed my life from the age of twenty-two. Once, I had craved to be a leader in an international scientific community of intellectual exchange. Now, I thought, planned, and worked for the well-being of just one individual, myself—for what was the Company but just myself, multiplied by fifteen or eleven or nine? I'd hardly given a thought to *normal* people, people not afflicted as we were, for a long, long time, and certainly I had given them nothing else—not even a halfway decent course in botany.

It was an awful shock, remembering what it had been like to take engagement with the great world for granted. I turned aside from the Trail and its traffic to climb a gray boulder shaggy with mountain laurel, and sat staring out over the summery woods, remembering the hours I'd spent talking with Bill—my professor, the one who'd exposed me to the virus—about world population control and sustainable agriculture. No details came back; but the sheer energy and breadth of vision, the ability to imagine tackling issues of such complexity and social import, now seemed unbelievable. How had I shrunk so small?

At that moment on the mountain my triumph of continuing to live looked paltry and mean. I'd died anyway, hadn't I? Wasn't this death-in-life a kind of unwitting suicide? But I knew at bottom that it was no ignoble thing to have gone on living where so many had died. My fit of self-loathing ran its course, and I climbed down from the rock and started back down the Trail toward the Water Gap, three miles below, where I'd left my car.

I pondered as I went. What was missing from my life now seemed clearer. Meaningful work, first and foremost. Engagement. Self-respect, if that wasn't asking too much—not simply for having survived, but for contributing something real to society; and perhaps even the respect of others.

And last of all I let myself remember, really remember, those spring-time afternoons in Bill's sunny office with its coffee machine and little refrigerator and daybed, and added one more thing: intimacy, social and sexual. Not the Company, that bunch of neutered and clairvoyant clones, but I and Thou: intimacy with the Other.

It was a list of things necessary to a fulfilled and happy life, and it bristled like a porcupine with potential stresses.

The trail was rough and steep, and I was wiped out from both my journeys, the inner more than the outer. When I let myself back into the condo the sun had set, and I thought with a fierce rush of resentment how *nice* it would be, just for once, to microwave a box of beans and franks and open a Coke, like a normal American citizen on holiday, instead of having to boil the goddamned homemade pasta and cook the

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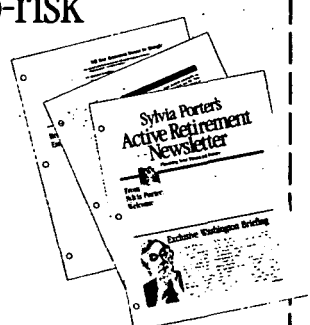

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spaghetti sauce from scratch. The strength of this resentment astounded me all over again: how long had I been sitting on the powderkeg of so much rage *against the virus itself*?

Enlightenment came early in the first week of my retreat, so I had plenty of time left to process my insights and form conclusions.

About personal intimacy first. Essential or not, I found that I still just didn't feel able to risk it. The potential trouble seemed bigger than the potential payoff; as I've mentioned, I lacked the skills.

About engagement. More promising. The thought of connecting myself in a meaningful way to society by some means that didn't threaten my own stability appealed to me a lot. I could *teach* in a more engaged fashion, but that felt far too personal, too exposed and risky. Then I thought of something else, something actually quite perfect: I could volunteer to work with AIDS patients. This may sound uniquely stressful for someone in my position, but the prospect oddly wasn't. I already knew everything about the progression of the disease, I'd been through it half a dozen times with dying Companions, so could not be shocked; I needn't fear infection (being infected already); and I felt certain my powers of detachment would be adequate.

Then about meaningful work. I pondered that one for the whole ten days remaining, pretty much all the time.

In the end it was a dream—the holo of the unconscious—that showed me what to do. I dreamed of Gregor Mendel, the Austrian monk who invented modern genetics while serving obscurely in a monastery. In my dream Mendel had the mild wide face with its little round-lensed spectacles of the photograph in the college biology text I used. Sweating and pink-faced in his heavy cassock, he bent tenderly over a bed of young peas, helping them find the trellis of strings and begin to climb. I stood at a little distance and watched, terribly moved to see how carefully he tucked the delicate tendrils around the strings. As I approached, he looked up and smiled as if to say, "Ah, so *there* you are at last!"—a smile brim-full of love—and handed me his notebook and pen. When I hung back, reluctant somehow to accept them, he straightened up slowly—his back was stiff—and moving closer drew me into an embrace so warm and protective that it seemed fatherly; yet at once I was aware of his penis where it arched against me through the folds of cloth, and of his two firm breasts pressed above my own. He kissed the top of my head. Then he was gone, striding away through the gate, and I stood alone among the peas, the pen and notebook in my hands somehow after all—in my own garden, my own back yard.

It had been a long time, literally years, since I'd last cried about anything; but when I woke that dawn my soaked pillow and clogged sinuses showed that I'd been weeping in my sleep, evidently for quite a while.

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Not since childhood had I felt such powerful love; not since childhood had anyone loved *me,* or held me, in just that way. To be reminded broke my heart, yet there was something healing in the memory too, and in the luxury of crying.

I lay in my dampness and thought about Mendel—how, having failed to qualify as a teacher, he had returned to the monastery; and there, in that claustrophobic place, in that atmosphere of failure, without the approval or maybe even the knowledge of his bishop, he planned his experiments and planted his peas.

In its way Mendel's life was as circumscribed, and presumably as monastic, as my own. Yet instead of whining and bitching he'd turned his hand to what was possible and done something uniquely fine.

Me, I'd written off further research because the campus lab facilities were so limited and so public, and applying for funding or the chance to work for a summer or two in a better-equipped lab seemed incautious. It was also true that I'd done about as much in the area of stress and the immune system as I cared to do, and that white rats got more expensive every year and the administration more grudging each spring when my latest requisition forms went in. But if I could change directions completely—

Well, the Company had a perfect field day with that dream. You can imagine. They were all sure I'd been telling myself to do exactly that: *shift directions*, devise some experiments for my own backyard garden and publish the results. About the symbolism of the hermaphroditic monk, opinion was divided; one person thought him a fused father/mother figure, breasts and gownlike cassock muddling his obvious identity as *Father* Mendel. ("Monks are called *Brother*," a lapsed-Catholic Companion protested.) Others suggested variously that the dream message concerned repressed bisexuality, incest, plain old sexual frustration, even religious longings. They all seemed to have a clearer idea of that part of what it meant than I had myself. But I thought they were right about the other part: that I seemed to want to turn my garden to scientific account in some way, then write up the results (the pen and notebook, both anachronistic types) and disseminate them.

II

This was the year 2000, when four separate strains of HIV virus had been isolated and more than a million people had died. There was a desperate need for qualified volunteer help, for the hospital wings, hastily thrown up by the newly organized National Health, were bursting with AIDS patients. The great majority of new cases now were addicts and

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the spouses and infants of addicts, and most of these were poor people. Except among the poor, sexual transmission of the virus had become much less common for a variety of reasons. So there were far fewer groups like ours being formed by then, but still plenty of old cases around—people exposed years ago who had survived a long time but whose luck had finally run out. As mine might any day.

Perhaps I secretly believed that by caring for such people I could somehow propitiate or suborn the Fates—"magical thinking" this is called—or perhaps my bond with them, which I refused to *feel,* demanded some other expression of solidarity. I don't know. I told myself that this was my debt to society, due and payable now.

So, soon after returning from my retreat, I attended an Induction Day for volunteers at the AIDS Task Force office in the city. The experience wrung me out and set me straight. I'd vaguely pictured myself helping in the wards, carrying lunch trays and cleaning bedpans, but it was plain from what the speakers told us that I would find this sort of work more emotionally demanding than I'd expected and more than I'd be at all able to handle. I had already known better than to offer myself as a counselor or a "buddy" assigned to a particular patient; I'd been "buddy" to too many Companions already, with more of this bound to come, and even in that collective and defended context it was hard. That left the dull but essential clerical work: getting new patients properly registered and identified within the bureaucracy of the National Health, processing and filing information, explaining procedures, taking medical histories.

I signed up for that, one afternoon a week. Compared to the burdens other volunteers were shouldering I felt like a coward, but within the Company itself I was a sort of hero, though resented also for what my action made the rest face anew: their fear. Several of the gay men who had gone to Induction Days in years past, but had not felt able to sign up for anything at all, felt especially put down; but *everyone* reported a sense of being implicitly criticized. "You're, like, the teetotaler at the cocktail party," said one of the gays, making us all laugh.

We were no band of activists and saints, the nine of us left of the original Company. Nobody new had joined us for a long time. When the National Health was chartered by Congress, the mandatory anonymous universal blood tests establishing who was and who was not a carrier had brought in a few fresh faces for a time, but those just-identified AB-Positives had mostly preferred to form groups of their own. The rigors of psychoneuroimmunology didn't appeal to everybody, nor did the medical profession agree unanimously that avoiding stress should be a First Principle for the infected. But it was ours; and by making my Companions feel guilty I was guilty myself of stressing them. I understood their resentment perfectly.

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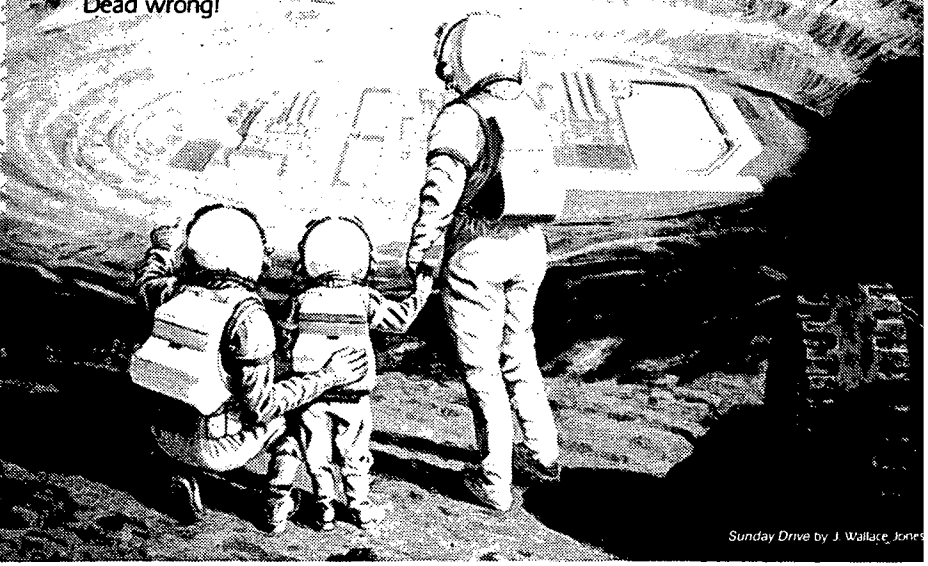

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At the same time I did feel a first small flush of self-respect to find that none of the others could face this work, relatively undemanding though it was, and that I could.

And almost at once I had my reward. The obsessive blotch-hunting stopped, I could again bear with composure the sight of my own skin; but a stranger and funnier reward was to follow. One day in the hospital outlet shop, on an errand for a busier volunteer, my eye fell by chance upon an object invented to make life easier for diabetic women: a hard plastic device molded to be tucked between the legs, with a spout designed to project a stream of urine forward, the more conveniently to be tested with litmus strips. In a flash a bizarre idea sprang fully developed into my head, exactly like one of those toads that lie buried in dried-up mudholes in the desert, patiently waiting out the years for the rains that tell it the time had come to emerge and mate. I bought the thing.

Back home I dug out an old electric dildo whose motor had long since burned out—a flexible rod with a "skin" of pink rubber. This I castrated, or rather circumcised. I then glued the three inches of amputated rubber foreskin snugly to the base of the plastic spout and snipped a hole in the tip.

I now had an implement capable of letting female plumbing mimic male plumbing, at least from a short distance, unless the observer were very sharp-eyed or very interested.

Inspired, my next step was to go out and buy myself a complete set of men's clothing: socks and underwear, trousers generously tailored, shirt, sweater, tie, and loosely fitting sport jacket, all of rather conservative cut and color and good quality. I even bought a pair of men's shoes. I'm quite a tall woman—five feet ten and a half inches—with a large-boned face, a flat chest, and the muscular arms and shoulders you build up through years at the rowing machine. And I found that the proverb *Clothes make the man* is true, for my full-length bathroom mirror confirmed that I made a wholly creditable one. Last of all, into the pouch of my brand-new jockey shorts, right behind the zipper of my new slacks, I tucked the plastic-and-rubber penis. The hard thing pressed against my pubic bone, none too comfortably.

Dress rehearsals went on for a whole weekend. By Monday, based on comparisons with certain water-sports videos I had seen, I thought the effect hilariously realistic. *Where Brother Mendel leads*, I said to myself with reckless glee, *I follow!* I can tell you for sure that this entire undertaking—making my dildo, buying my disguises, learning to fish out the fake penis suavely and snug it in place and let fly—was altogether the most fun I'd had in years. The only fun, really, the only bursting out of bounds. The thought of beans and franks was nothing to this.

When I felt ready for a trial run I put on my reverse-drag costume and

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drove to a shopping mall in a neighboring state, where for three hours I practiced striding confidently into the men's rooms of different department stores. I would hit the swinging door with a straight arm, swagger up to a urinal, plant my feet wide apart . . . I kind of overacted the role, but I could do this much with a flourish anyway. What I could *not* do was unclench my sphincter; I was all style and no substance in the presence of authentic (urinating) men. So I flunked that final test.

But my first purpose all along had been voyeuristic, and in this I was wildly, immediately successful. It was a mild day in early autumn. Lots of guys in shirtsleeves, with no bulky outer clothing to hinder the eager voyeur, came in and struck a pose at urinals near mine. For three hours I stole furtive glances at exposed penises from within a disguise that no one appeared even to question, let alone see through. It was *marvelous*. I drove home exhilarated quite as much by my own daring as by what I'd managed to see. To have infiltrated that bastion of male privilege and gotten away with it! What a triumph! What an actor!

All that year, the year 2000, I worked by fits and starts on my role of male impersonator, adding outfits to suit the different seasons and practicing body control (roll of shoulders, length of stride) like a real actor training for a part. I cruised the men's rooms less often than I'd have liked, since it seemed only prudent to avoid those near home, and I was kept fairly busy. But over time by trial and error I gained confidence. I learned that large public men's rooms in bus and train stations, airports, interstate rest areas and the like, were best—that men visiting these were usually in a hurry and the rooms apt to be fairly crowded, so that people were least likely to take notice of me there. It was in one such place that I was at last able to perfect my role by actually relieving myself into the porcelain bowl, and after that time I could usually manage it, a fact which made me smug as a cat.

Every cock I sneaked a look at that year seemed beautiful to me. The holos were so much less interesting than this live show that I all but stopped renting them. I also made some fascinating observations. For instance, young gay men no longer rash enough to pick somebody up in a bus station or whatever would sometimes actually stand at adjacent urinals, stare at one another, and stroke themselves erect. Wow! I felt a powerful affinity with these gays, whose motives for being there were so much like my own. Alas, they also made me nervous, for my prosthesis couldn't hold up to fixed regard, and sometimes, if I lingered too long, someone would show more interest than was safe.

The Company had been three-fourths gay men in the beginning, five of whom were still around, yet not one had ever said a word to the rest of us about mutual exhibitionism in public toilets, and it seemed possible that most straight men had never noticed. After sixteen years of weekly

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group therapy I'd have sworn none of us could possibly have any secrets left; but perhaps the gay Companions simply preferred not to offer up this behavior to the judgment of the straights—even now, and even us. Perhaps it was humiliating for them, even a bit sordid. I could see that. This behavior of mine had its sordid side. The recreational/adventurous side outweighed that twenty to one; but I took my cue from the gays, and kept my weird new hobby to myself—learning in this way that withholding a personal secret from the Company, retaining one exotic scrap of privacy, exhilarated me nearly as much as having live penises to admire after all the dreary years of admiring them on tape.

But if the dream image of Gregor-Mendel-as-hermaphrodite was present to me through much of this experience—for I knew that in some deep way they were connected—Mendel was a still more potent icon in the garden that summer. At first thought, backyard research seemed very small beer. I knew as well as anyone that the day had long since passed when a single white-coated scientist, working alone amid the test tubes in his own basement laboratory, could do important research. Mendel himself had had a larger plot of ground at his disposal.

Yet examining the unfamiliar literature of this field, and browsing in *Biological Abstracts*, forced me to revise my view: there were some very useful experiments within the scope even of a backyard researcher. Some of the published papers that interested me most had been written by amateurs. It appeared that master gardeners, like amateur archeologists and paleontologists, had long been making substantial contributions to the fields of plant breeding, pest control, cultivation practices, and the field trials of new varieties. Organic methods of gardening and farming, which were what interested me, were particularly open to contributions from gardeners and farmers, non-scientists who had taught themselves to run valid trials and keep good records. Genetic engineering and chemical warfare were clearly not the only ways to skin the cat of improved crop yields.

The more I looked into it, the more impressed I was, and correspondingly the more hopeful. Though but a beginning gardener I was a trained scientist; if these other people could do something useful in their modest way, I should certainly be able to.

I'd lost my first two crops of melons to bacterial wilt and/or mosaic virus, I wasn't sure which, and both years my cucumbers had also died of wilt. (The first couple of seasons in an organic garden are tough sledding.) The striped cucumber beetle was the probable vector for both diseases. God knows I had enough of the little bastards. Now, you can grow *Cucurbita*—the vining crops, including all melons, squashes, cucumbers, and gourds—under cheesecloth or spun-bonded floating row covers, which exclude the bugs, but you have to uncover the plants when

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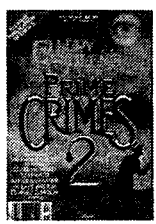

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the female flowers appear so the bees can get at them, and if the bees can, so can the beetles. Besides, half the fun of gardening is watching the crops develop, and how can you do that if they're shrouded under a white web of Ultramay?

No, the thing was to produce a cultivar with resistance, or at least tolerance, to one or more of the insect-borne diseases. After reading everything I could get my hands on about bacterial wilt and cucumber mosaic virus, I concluded that a project of trying to breed a really flavorful variety of muskmelon strongly resistant to bacterial wilt would make the most sense. Wilt was a bigger problem in our area, and some hybridization for wilt resistance in muskmelons had already been done. But I was much more powerfully attracted to the mosaic problem. It took the Company about half a minute to point out, once they'd understood the question, that cucumber mosaic is caused by a *virus*. There's no cure for mosaic; once it infects a plant the plant declines, leaf by leaf and vine by vine, until it dies. (Just like you-know-who.)

There's no cure for bacterial wilt, either, but I couldn't help myself: I began to plan an experiment focusing on mosaic.

I didn't want to waste time duplicating the research of others, so I made several trips that summer to Penn State's main campus at University Park to extract from their excellent library everything that was known about all previous efforts to breed virus resistance into muskmelons. These trips were fun. For one thing it pleased me a lot to be doing research again. For another I did the trips in undrag, stopping at every highway rest area on the Pennsylvania Turnpike between Valley Forge and Harrisburg to investigate men's rooms—and in fact simply to use them too, as this was, prosthesis and all, easier, quicker, and less grubby than using the ladies'.

It turned out that the breeders had never made much headway against virus disease in muskmelons, and since the introduction of row covers and beetle traps the subject had been generally slighted. Commercial growers had been getting around the problem of pollination for quite a while by constructing great tents of Ultramay over their fields and putting a hive of honeybees inside with the melons. As this was hardly practical for the home gardener, the state agricultural extension services recommended several pesticides for use on the beetles (and aphids, another serious virus vector for cucurbits) during the two or three weeks when the plants would have to come out from under cover to be pollinated. Spraying at dusk was suggested, to spare the bees. But these were persistent toxins and I doubted all the bees would be spared, though they might pollinate the vines before they died.

I also read up on the life cycle of the striped cucumber beetle, then built a clever cage in which to rear as many generations of virus-bearing

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beetles as necessary to carry the critters through the winter—they hibernate in garden trash, but I wanted to guarantee my supply. When the cage was ready I rigged a shelf-and-fluorescent-tube setup in which to raise a sequence of zucchini plants to feed the beetles—nothing grows faster than a zucchini, and nothing's easier to grow, and the beetles love them. As each plant in turn began to sicken I would transplant a new, healthy seedling into the soil on the bottom of the rearing cage, then cut through the stem of the sick zucchini, shake off the beetles, and remove the plant. The roots had to be left undisturbed, because the soil around them contained eggs, feeding larvae, and pupae, but by the time the space was needed for a new transplant the roots would have died or been eaten up.

It worked beautifully. My quarter-inch black-and-yellow beetles spent that winter, and the next four winters, living the life of Riley.

And throughout that hard late winter of 2001 I spent all my spare time thinking out my project, its objectives and procedures, until I knew exactly what I wanted to do. By April a small ranked and labeled army of cantaloupe seedlings stood waiting in my basement, under lights, for the day when they could safely be set out in their carefully prepared beds and tucked under Ultramay. Assuming no spectacular early success, the plan would organize my summers for the next five years. Plant breeding is not an enterprise for impatient people. It *is* a gesture of faith in the (personal) future.

In early May, just as the azaleas were at their peak of bloom, a week before the last frost date in Delaware County, Jacob Lowenfels and his team of American and French researchers announced their discovery of the AIDS vaccine.

The announcement threw me, and the rest of the Company with me, into a profound funk. Except for us and several thousand dying people, the whole city seemed to rejoice around us; even the war news yielded pride of place. Thank God the spring quarter had ended, except for some finals I could grade with one hand tied behind me. Watering cantaloupe seedlings before turning in, on the night of May 15, I came within a hair of wrenching the table over and dumping the lot of them, *smash,* onto the concrete floor. Why should these frivolous *Cucurbita* live when so many innocents were dead?

I know, I know: the Lowenfels vaccine was of enormous importance even to us—even, for that matter, to those who had developed the disease but would not begin dying seriously for months or years; for overnight the fear of discovery and persecution ended. We were no longer lepers. People could acquire immunity to us now. Only those already in the final stages of dying from AIDS benefitted not at all, so that the AIDS wings of the hospitals lay for weeks beneath a blanket pall of sorrow.

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And of course I knew all this really, even at the time. I carried out my trays of cantaloupes and honeydews on the sixteenth after all, and planted them on schedule. The beds beneath their Ultramay covers looked so peculiar that I decided to fence the yard, discourage the neighbors' curiosity. I planted with a leaden heart that day, but the melons didn't seem to mind; in their growing medium of compost, peat moss, and vermiculite dug well into my heavy clay soil they soon sent out runners and began to produce male flowers. When the female flowers appeared about ten days later I pulled the Ultramay off of some beds just long enough to rub the anthers of the male flowers against the pistils of the female ones. At other beds I sent in the beetle troops. At the same time I was growing a year's supply of vegetables in my kitchen garden. My computer kept daily records for both garden and field trials. In August I gave my control melons away by the cartrunkload to the Companions, ate tons of them myself, froze some, saved the rest to rot peacefully till they could be blended with autumn leaves into a giant compost tower. (The vines that died of mosaic, and the malformed fruit they produced, if any, went out with the trash.) And I preserved, packaged, labeled, and froze my hybrid seeds.

None of the varieties I'd inoculated with the virus that first year had resisted it worth a damn. I saved seed from only one mosaic-stunted hybrid cultivar, a *Cucumis melo* called "Mi ting tang," which had shown good resistance to cucumber mosaic (plus gummy stem blight and downy mildew) in field trials in Japan. That one had managed to struggle to maturity and produce a crop despite its illness. The fruit, though dwarfed, had a fair flavor and good thick flesh, and I thought I might backcross and then cross it with other varieties after I saw the results of my hybridizing the following year. Resistance in the Ano strains of muskmelon appeared to vary according to the weather; I wanted to find out more about that too.

Between times I canned and froze and dried my garden produce as one after another the overlapping crops came in. Once I'd gotten over the shock of the vaccine it was a wonderful summer, the best of my life, full of pleasurable outdoor work; and the four that followed resembled it pretty closely.

Each fall and winter I would overhaul my records and revise my schedules; compost plant residues; treat the soil of the inoculated beds to kill any leftover beetles; care for the next year's beetle crop and manage their supply of zucchini plants; clean and oil my tools; consume my preserved stock of organically grown, squeaky-clean food; teach my classes and run my labs; put in my afternoon at the hospitals every week; meet with the Company; and take my treatments. In a small way I'd also begun to write for gardening magazines, mainly Rodale's and *National Gardening*,

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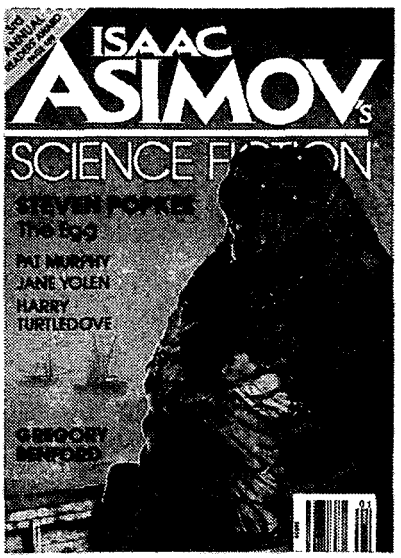
THIS YEAR ENTER ANOTHER DIMENSION.



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though occasionally for *Horticulture* or even *Harrowsmith.* I'd never been so busy nor interested nor free of anxiety, and I think now that unconsciously I'd come to believe that I was safe. "Magical thinking," sure—but it *was* a much healthier and better-rounded way of life, no question.

It was the fifth year of the research, the spring of 2006, that two events occurred to shatter the even tenor of my days. The arrival of the ship from outer space was the big news; but the Hefn delegation was still in England, and in the daily headlines, when devastating news broke upon us in the Company: for our counselor Elizabeth had developed the bodily wasting and red-rimmed eyes of AIDS-Related Complex, and confessed at last that all this while she had been keeping a secret of her own.

One and all we were stricken anew with terror, my eight surviving Companions and I. Elizabeth who had been our mother, our guardian, our stay against destruction, who had held us together and wedged the door shut against the world's cruelty, could not be dying—for if she were dying we could none of us feel safe. Our reaction was infantile and total: we were furious. Who would take care of us when she was dead? When an accountant who called himself "Phil" promptly developed skin lesions, we all blamed Elizabeth.

"Phil's" symptoms turned out to be hysterical; his apparent defeat had been the medium through which we had collectively expressed our virulently reactivated panic and dread. After that episode we pulled ourselves together and stopped whining long enough to think a little of Elizabeth, and not so much about our miserable selves.

She had been admitted to Graduate Hospital, the one our psychoneuroimmunology team was affiliated with. I sat with her for a while one afternoon, a sulky, resentful child and her mortally ill mother. When I apologized for my behavior Elizabeth smiled tiredly. "Oh, I know how you all feel, you're reacting exactly like I thought you would. Listen, Sandy, this had to happen sometime. You folks have all been much too dependent and you know it. Now's your chance to stand on your own, ah, eighteen feet—but I'm sorry you feel let down." She grimaced. "I feel pretty bad about that myself."

Her generosity dissolved my fretful resentment; and love, shocking as the dream-love of Gregor Mendel, flooded into the vacancy. I choked and burst into wrenching tears; Elizabeth patted my arm, which made me cry harder; in a moment I was crouching beside her bed, my hot, wet face pressed against her shoulder, the first time in twenty years that I had touched another human being intimately. A surreal moment. It was glorious, to tell the truth, though I felt as if my chest would burst with grief.

When I forced myself to report this scene on Company time, the story was received in a glum silence tinged with embarrassment. Finally

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"Larry," a balding, thickening physical therapist I'd known since he was a skinny teenager, puffed out a breath and said disgustedly, "Well, don't feel like the Lone Ranger, Sandy. I never touch anybody either, except on the job. Hell, we *all* love Elizabeth! But I never let myself know that. I haven't taken an emotional risk in so many years I literally can't remember when the last time was, and you people aren't any better than me."

"I've often thought," said "Phil," "that it's funny we don't love each other. I mean, as much as we need each other, you'd think . . . "

He trailed off, and we glanced obliquely (and guiltily) at one another, except for the two couples present—who naturally couldn't help looking a little smug—and the one father who blurted defensively, "I love my kids!"

"Elizabeth knows we love her," said "Sherry," over against the far wall.

"Maybe she does," "Larry" growled, "but *we* need to know it. That's my point, goddammit."

"Other groups do better. Some of them are really close," I put in. "Maybe we fuss over ourselves so much we can't connect, except to spot weaknesses."

"Other groups don't have our survival rate either," "Mitch" reminded me.

Breaking the gloomy silence, "Phil" roused himself to say, "What about these spacemen, anything doing in that direction?"

When the Hefn first arrived, half the world's people had recoiled in panicky dismay; the other half had seemed to expect them to provide a magical cure for all our ills: war, cancer, pollution, overpopulation, famine, AIDS. So far they had shown no interest in us whatever. The landing party was presently in London because the mummified corpse of one of their relations, stranded here hundreds of years ago, had been discovered in a Yorkshire bog; but suggestions that they set up some sort of cultural and scientific exchange with humanity had been politely ignored and I doubted there was any chance at all that Elizabeth's life was going to be saved by ET intervention. The AIDS Task Force in New York had already sent them a long, pleading letter, but had received no reply. We were all aware of these facts. Nobody bothered to answer "Phil," and after a while the hour was over and we broke up; and when the Hefn ship took off from the moon a few weeks later, having neither helped nor harmed us by their visit, we weren't surprised. It was what we'd expected.

Just as we expected Elizabeth to waste and decline, and finally die, and she did—leaving the Companions rudderless and demoralized. At

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least we'd rallied and borne up pretty well throughout the last weeks of her dying. We must have done her, and ourselves, a little good.

Surprisingly, despite even this trauma none of the rest of us became ill. Apparently we who were still alive were the hardiest of the lot, or at least the ones who had taken the best care of ourselves. But the emotional jolt of Elizabeth's death—the one death we had *not* protected ourselves from being badly hurt by—showed me, as the dream of Mendel had showed me all those years ago, that something was still wrong with my life. It was still a loveless life, and just when I seemed to need it least it now appeared that I was no longer willing to do without love. I'd failed to acknowledge Elizabeth alive; now that she was dead I wanted at least to keep alive the emotion—the capacity for feeling and showing emotion—that she had released in me at the end.

It didn't have to be romantic love, in fact I rather thought that any other sort would probably be preferable, though I was still determined not to *teach* lovingly. It seems odd now that I never thought of getting a pet—or maybe the image of a dog wouldn't readily superimpose itself upon the image of a backyard carpeted with melon vines? And I'm allergic to cat dander . . . anyway, whatever the reasons, the idea never crossed my mind. The months glided by as usual, and became years, before anything changed.

III

What happened was that I broke a small bone in my left ankle in a common type of running accident: one foot came down at the edge of a pothole and twisted beneath me as I fell. The X-ray showed a hairline fracture. They put me in a cast and crutches and ordered me off the foot for a month, and this was May.

May 2010; Year Four of my second five-year plan. With the whole season's research at stake I had no choice but to hire some help.

A bright, possibly talented sophomore in my botany course took the job. His name was Eric Meredith, and he was the first person other than my unobservant parents, a dishwasher repairer, and the water meter reader to have entered my house in the ten years I had owned it. I bitterly resented the need that had brought him there; but I knew the source of this bitterness (apprehension: what other infirmities would be violating my privacy in future summers?) and made a perfunctory effort not to work it out on Eric.

He seemed not to take my unfriendliness personally—I had a certain reputation at the college as a grump—and willingly did what I told him to without trying to chat me up. I showed him *once* how to handle the

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transplants, how big and how far apart to make the holes, how to work fertilizer and compost into the loose earth, dump in a liter of water, and firm the soil around the stem. He never forgot, never did it wrong, even beneath my jealous eye; he seemed to discover a knack for the work in the process of performing it that pleased him as much as it mollified me. He was scrupulously careful with the labeling and weighed the Ultramay at the beds' edges with earth, leaving no gaps for wandering bees or beetles to find. In a week the entire lot of transplants was in the ground. I recorded the data myself—I could sit at a keyboard, anyway—but Eric did everything else.

He grew so earnestly interested in the experiment, what's more, that after the second week he couldn't help asking questions; and I found his interest so irresistible that before I knew it I'd invited him to review the records.

For I did, finally, really appear to be getting someplace. Several hybrids of the "Mi ting tang" (Ano II) strain had done unusually well the previous year; I thought I knew now which of their parents to cross with Perfection and Honey Dew to produce at least one variety which would show exceptional tolerance to mosaic in the field. Immunity now looked impossible, resistance unlikely; but I felt I would be more than satisfied with a strain that could *tolerate* the presence of the virus in its system without being killed or crippled too much—that could go on about its business of making a pretty good crop of sweet, firm-fleshed melons in spite of the disease.

Eric sat for an hour while the screen scrolled through the records of a near-decade. I jumped when he spoke. "This whole thing is just *beautifully* conceived." His amazement was understandable; why expect anything good from a professor as mediocre in class as I? "You're just about there, aren't you?"

He had a plain, narrow face, much improved by enthusiasm. I felt my own face growing warm. "Mm-hm, I think so. One more season. Of course, this isn't a very exciting experiment—not like what they do in the labs, genetic manipulation, that sort of thing."

"Well," said Eric, "but it's not so much the experiment itself as the experimental model. Heck, you could apply this model to any traits you were trying to select for. Did you work it out yourself?" I suspected that this was doubt, but when I nodded he did too. "I thought so, I never came across this system of notation before and I bet everybody'll be using it after you publish."

I'd been working in isolation a long time, without admiration, and the traitorous balloon of gratitude that swelled my chest undid me. "Come have something cold to drink," I offered gruffly, and as I went before him into the kitchen the rubber tip of my crutch slipped on a wet patch of

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linoleum and I fell, whacking my head hard on the corner of a shelf on the way down.

For a few seconds the pain in both ankle and scalp was blinding. Then as I struggled to rise, embarrassed and angry, and as Eric leaned over me to help, I saw the drops of blood on the floor, brilliant against the pale tiles. "Get away!" I shouted, shoving him so hard he stumbled against the counter and I fell flat on my back. In rage I hauled myself upright, holding to the counter, and managed to rip off some paper toweling to blot my head with. Again Eric moved instinctively to help, and again I snapped, "No, get back I said, keep away from me. *Did you get any blood on yourself?*"

"Unh-unh," said Eric, looking at his hands and arms, bewildered and then—bright student—suddenly comprehending. "Oh, hey, it's okay—I'm vaccinated."

I froze and stared at him, my head singing. "*What did you say?*"

"I'm *vaccinated* against AIDS. A bone punch in the sixth grade, see?" He pulled down the neck of his tee shirt and showed me the little V-shaped scar on his collarbone.

Vaccinated. Immune. Of course he was. *Everybody* was vaccinated nowadays. Eric had been in no danger from me—but in my instinctive panic I'd given myself away. For exactly the third time that decade I burst into tears, and I couldn't have told you which of the two of us was the more embarrassed.

I don't remember how I got him out of the house. I spent that evening raging at myself, my situation, the plague that had blighted my life, aborted my career, turned me into a time bomb of thwarted need. So what if it came out that I was a carrier of the virus? Nobody gave a damn anymore. During the past few years, the deadly microorganisms that had built up strength in my system throughout the first ten had begun to decline. I might never die of AIDS now, might not even be infectious, nobody knew. Even if I were, the world had been immunized against me. Yet I *felt* infectious, consumed with longing for something that would certainly be destroyed if I tried to possess it. No amount of rational certainty that this was *not* so acted to defuse a conviction which had for so long been the central emotional truth, the virtual mainspring, of my life. For the past nine years I had abstained from sex for my own reasons of stress-avoidance, not to protect others; I had known this and not-known it, both.

The truth was, I had lived as a leper too long to change my self-concept. Now here was this boy, who had guessed my guilty secret just like that and spoken it aloud without batting an eye. He would have to be replaced, possibly bribed . . . no, that was crazy thinking. Yet the thought of facing him was unendurable. I'd pay him off in the morning and dismiss him.

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The pain of this thought astonished me; yet I couldn't doubt it must be done.

I had not, however, factored in Eric's own attitudes and wishes. The next day he showed up at the usual time and went straight to work in the kitchen garden, spreading straw mulch on the tomato and pepper beds, whistling the noble theme from the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh. From the kitchen window I watched his tall, bony frame fold and unfold, gather the straw from the cart in armfuls and heap it carefully around the bases of the plants; and gradually I became aware that here was the only living being, not one of the Company, who knew The Truth. Gradually, it even began to seem a wonderful thing that somebody knew. Eric dragged the empty cart across the yard for more straw bales, then back to the nightshade beds. I regarded his back in its sweat-soaked tee shirt, the play of the shoulder muscles, the stretching tendons at the sides of his knees as he folded and straightened—and something fluttered and turned over in my middle-aged insides. "Eric," I murmured in wonderment; and as if he had heard he turned his head, saw me at the window, waved and grinned. Then he stooped to gather another armful of straw and I fell back out of view.

That grin . . . I dropped onto a stool, hearing in my head the incongruous voice of my best high-school friend: "He looked over at me from the other side of the class and it just really boinged me." Boinged, I'd been boinged! By Eric's cheerfulness, the wave of his long arm with its brown work glove at the end. I knew by then, I guess, that I wasn't going to fire him; but I couldn't see how to do anything else with him either.

At noon Eric came to the house to wash up under the spigot before leaving, in his khaki shorts and old running shoes. He had taken off his shirt, and dust and bits of straw had stuck to the sweaty skin of his chest and back, and in the curly golden hairs of his legs and the blond mop on his head. He was a very lanky guy, pretty well put together, not a bit handsome. I regarded his long body with awe.

"I'll be late tomorrow, got a dentist appointment," he said. "Listen, I wanted you to know I'm not going to say anything to anybody else about yesterday. In case you were worrying about it. I mean, I don't go in for gossip much anyway, and even if I did I wouldn't spread stuff around about you."

I managed to reply, "Thanks, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't."

Eric started to say something else but instead stuck his head under the faucet for a minute, dried himself on his shirt, and slipped away around the house. There was a paperback novel crammed into the back pocket of his shorts, its title *Sowbug!* scrawled diagonally across the cover in screaming colors, and water droplets spangled his bare shoulders.

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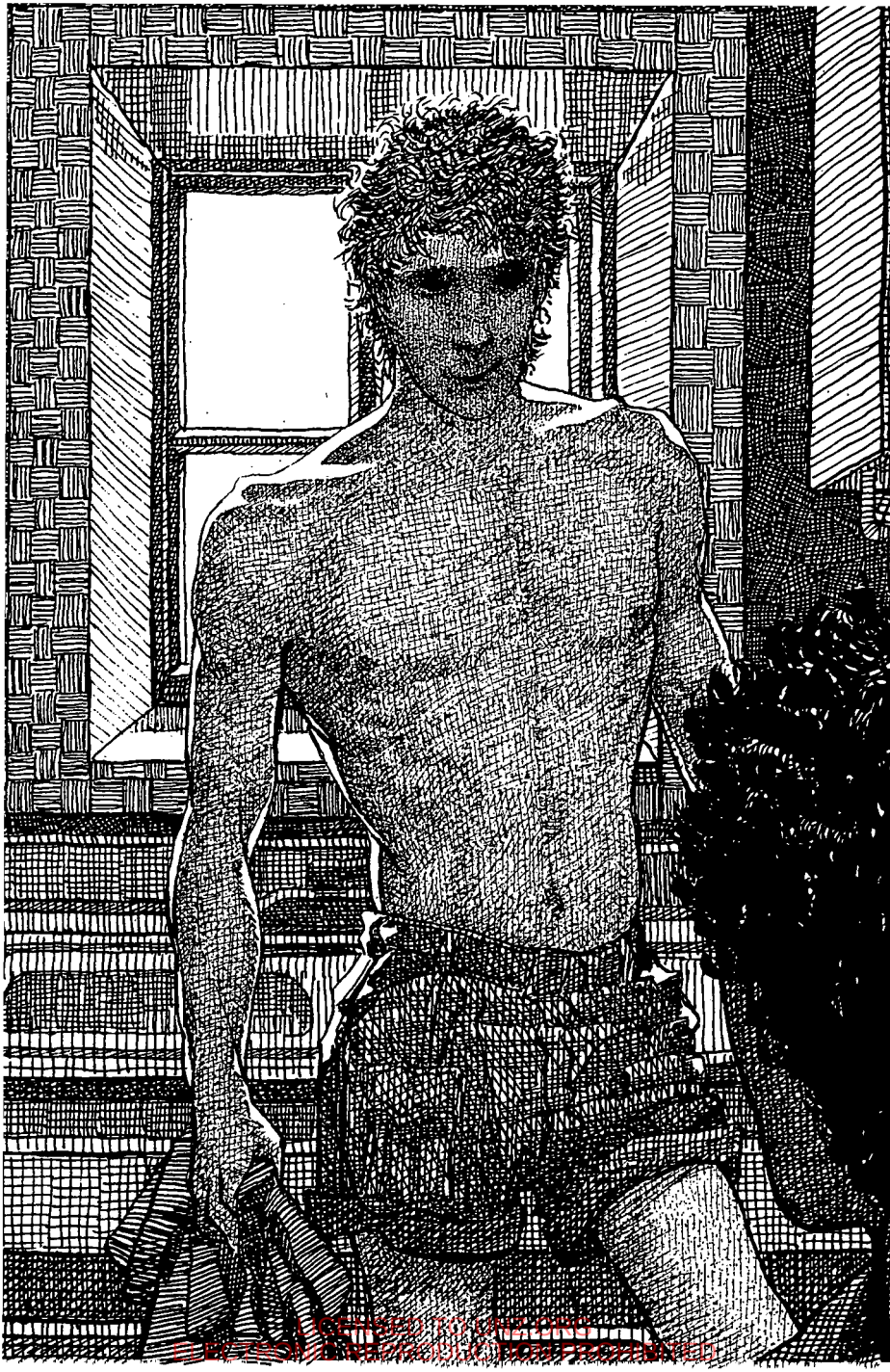

And so we went on as before, but nothing was as it had been for me. Once again I became an actor, for I found myself against all sense and expectation carrying a blazing torch for a boy considerably less than half my age: a clever, nice, probably not terribly remarkable boy who (as the Companions agreed) was serving now as representative object of the pent-up love of half a lifetime. Eric, the wick for this deep reservoir of flammable fuel, became "Lampwick" in Company nomenclature; Lampwick, the boy who went to Pleasure Island with Pinocchio and turned into a braying jackass before the puppet's horrified eyes.

I felt like the jackass, let me tell you. *Knowing* the passion that so rocked me to be symbolic and categorical, hardly about Eric-the-singular-individual at all, made exactly zero difference to my experience of it. In the Company we'd been talking and thinking more about love since Elizabeth's death, and they all thought it was great. *All* loves are part personal, part associational, the more worldly among them assured me. Go for it! Get it out of your system. Wasn't your primary sexual involvement in the past with a teacher? Hey, the unconscious is a tidy bastard; naturally yours would think it fitting to pass the baton to the next generation by making you fall for a student of your own.

And I have to admit that even the hopeless misery of *this* passion was, in a weird way, kind of fun. It rejuvenated my libido, for one thing. It took me out of myself. I no longer feared the lethal effects of stress so much, and in any case this stress was salutary too.

I did take enormous care to protect myself from the humiliation of letting Eric catch me out, as he had caught me out about my antibody status. He never dreamed I seethed with lust for him, I feel quite sure of that. I think he did regret my aloofness—he was a sociable boy, and truly admired my work—but not so much as to be pained by it; and in any event Eric had other fish to fry that summer.

My ankle had healed well enough by late July for me to take over the kitchen garden, and a bit later the processing of its produce, when that began to roll in; but I pretended a greater disability than I really had just to keep Eric around. And when my old mother in Denver had a stroke, making a visit unavoidable, I was happy to leave him in charge of both kitchen garden and melon plots. The special hybrids were looking great, but records on rainfall and hours of sunlight during this crucial month would have to be kept. I asked Eric to come live in the house while I was away, and promised him a bonus if he did a meticulous job of keeping the records.

I decided not to fly, and drove west in an erotically supercharged state of psyche, sleeping in the carbed, peeing in the men's rooms of seven states, feasting my eyes on hundreds of penises and fantasizing that this or that one could be Eric's . . . I hadn't done much of this recently and

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suspect I made a less convincing man as I grew older but I had a terrific time for a while, although to tell the truth I rather wore my imagination out. My mother was feeling better and received my attentions with gratified complacency; but the five grandchildren had become her life, and we regarded one another, benignly enough, through a glaze of mutual incomprehension. It seemed likely that I would see her next when I flew out for the funeral.

All the same I stayed a week before returning by easy stages across the hot, dry, dusty plains, eager to get back but pleased to think of Eric still holding the fort in my stead. No point in pretending I couldn't handle the work now, not after a drive like this. Anyway, the term would be starting soon. When I got back I'd have to let him go; and so I dawdled and fantasized across Kansas and Missouri, and late in the afternoon of August 30 was approaching Indianapolis when I told the radio to turn itself on and was informed that early that same morning there had been a meltdown at the nuclear power plant at Peach Bottom, on the Susquehanna River downstream from Three Mile Island.

Luckily traffic was light. I managed to pull off the road without smashing up, and sat gripping the wheel while the radio filled me in. The disaster was unprecedented, making even Chernobyl look paltry. The Peach Bottom plant was fifty years old and overdue to be shut down for good. It *had* been shut down in the Eighties, then reopened in 1993, when improved decontamination technology had reduced its radioactivity to acceptable levels. Though the plant had a history of scandalously inept management, technicians asleep on duty and so on, stretching back a long way, it didn't appear that the meltdown had been caused by human error.

From the standpoint of damage to nearby populations the weather could not have been much worse, given that it was summer. A storm system with a strong south-southwest wind had pushed the enormous radioactive plume across the fertile Amish farmland of Lancaster County; then a westerly shift had carried the plume over the continuous urban sprawl of Wilmington, Philadelphia, and Trenton. Heavy rains had dumped the hot stuff on the ground across that whole area. The storm had also put out the fire at the plant; damage was therefore horrific but, so far, highly localized.

The plume had been washed to earth before it could enter the upper atmosphere—but in one of the most densely populated regions of the world. A very high death count from acute radiation poisoning was expected; the Amish farmers, working in the fields without radios to warn them, were especially at risk. *Eight million people,* more or less, had to be evacuated and relocated, probably permanently, for the Philadelphia-

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Wilmington area would be a wasteland for at least a decade to come, perhaps much longer.

Terry Carpenter's name was mentioned again and again. A moderate Republican Congressman from Delaware County, Carpenter was being described by reporters as a miracle worker. His understanding and the speed of his response suggested that Carpenter had planned carefully for just this sort of emergency. Because of him the cost in human lives would be far less, though no one person could cope with every aspect of a disaster as great as this one . . . (I'd crossed over and voted for the guy myself, last election. Good move.)

People who had not yet left their homes had been urged to keep doors and windows shut and air conditioners turned off, to reduce inhalation uptake, which would be reduced somewhat anyway by the rain, and to draw water in their bathtubs and sinks before the runoff from the storm could contaminate the supply. Each was to pack a small bag . . .

The radio went on and on as I sat by the highway, shocked beyond thought. My house, my garden, the campus, the hospital where I worked and the one where I had my monthly treatments, the Company, the experiment—all the carefully assembled infrastructure of my unnatural life—had melted down with the power plant. What in the world was I going to do? My trip had saved me from radiation poisoning, and from being evacuated and stuck in a Red Cross camp someplace; my car and I were clean. But my life was in ruins.

And all the while, still in shock, I thought about Eric, whom I'd left to mind the store, who might be in my house right now with the doors and windows shut, waiting to be evacuated. Abruptly snapping out of it, I drove back onto the road and went off at the next exit, where I found a pay phone that worked and put the call through.

But the phone in my house rang and rang, and finally I hung up and stood shaking in the already-sweltering morning, unable to think what to do now, stranded. Impossible to go back to Denver. Impossible to go home. Impossible also to find Eric, at least until things settled down. Eric, of course, would go to his parents' house—only what if they lived in the evacuation zone? A lot of our students were local kids; it was that kind of college.

I knew not even that much about Eric's personal life, I realized with a furious rush of shame, and at this moment all my uncertainty and powerlessness fused into a desperate need to find him, see him, make sure he was all right. Of all the desperately threatened people I knew in the area of contamination, only this one boy mattered to me.

I got back in my car and started driving. I drove all night, stopped at a western Pennsylvania sleepyside for a nap the following morning, drove on again. The radio kept me posted on developments. All that way I

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thought about Eric. Half of my mind was sure he was fine, safe in his parents' (grandparents'?) home in Pittsburgh or Allentown; the other half played the Eric-tape over and over, his longness and leanness, the grownup way he'd handled my breaking down, his careful tenderness with the melon seedlings (like Mendel's!), his reliability, his frank, unstudied admiration of my trial model, his schlock horror novel *Sowbug!* Why hadn't I been *nicer* to him while I'd had the chance? Why had I played it safe? My house and garden were lost, my experimental records doubtless ruined by fallout, the work of the past decade all gone for nothing, yet worse by far was the fact that I had squandered my one God-given chance to come close to another person, thrown it away, out of fear. I beat on the steering wheel and sobbed. Eric, Eric, if only I hadn't been so scared.

Whatever happened now, I knew I would never again watch him fold that long body up like a folding ruler to tend the crops or sic the virus-loaded striped cucumber beetles onto a melon cultivar. That life was finished. There was nothing to connect us now, because I had wasted my one chance and would never get another. I was hardly thinking straight, of course; I was in shock. I'd heard my colleagues speak often enough, and wistfully enough, of promising former students from whom they rarely or never heard anymore. Students go away and teachers stay—that's the way it's always been, they'd say. Put not your faith in students. A card at Christmas for a year or two after they leave, then zip.

But I wasn't thinking of what Eric might or might not have done in some hypothetical future time; I was thinking of what I myself had failed to do and now could never do. I cried, off and on, for hours, being forced once by uncontrollable weeping to stop the car. I shed far more tears during that nightmarish trip than in my whole previous life since childhood. If I'd only put my arms around him, just one time, just held him for a minute, not even saying anything—if I'd just managed to do that—As the hours and miles went by my grief became more and more inconsolable, as if all the tragedy of the meltdown, and even of my life, were consolidated into this one spurned chance to become human. It didn't matter whether Eric wanted to be befriended (let alone held) by me, diseased middle-aged spinsterish schoolmarm and part-time pervert that I had become; what mattered, beyond measure or expression, was that I'd been too cowardly even to consider the possibility of closeness with another person and now it was too late.

I drove and wept, wept and drove. Gradually traffic going the opposite direction began to build up. Just west of Harrisburg a bunch of state troopers were turning the eastbound cars back. Beyond the roadblock only two lanes were open; the other two, and the four going west, were full of cars fleeing the contaminated zone. I pulled over, cleaned my

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blotchy face as best I could with a wet cloth, and got out. A trooper was directing U-turns at the head of a line of creeping cars. I walked up to him. "Excuse me, do you know how I can find out where somebody is?"

The trooper turned, gray-faced with exhaustion. "You from Philadelphia?" I nodded. "I dunno, bud," he replied—reminding me that I was still in my traveling costume of undrag. "In a coupla days they'll know where everybody's at, but it's a madhouse back there right now, there's eight million people they're trying to evacuate. You had your radio on?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Maybe it's too far to pick it up out here." He took off his cap and rubbed his hand over his face. "Everybody that's got someplace to go, that has a car, is supposed to go there. Relatives, whatever. That's what all these people are doing. These are the ones from Lancaster and thereabouts—Philadelphia people were supposed to take the Northeast Extension or else head down into south Jersey or Delaware along with the Wilmington people. The ones that don't have noplace to go, they're all being sent to camps up in the Poconos or down around Baltimore. The Army's bringing in tents and cots."

"For eight million people?"

"Naaah, most of 'em'll have somebody they can stay with for a while. They figure a million and a half, two million, tops. Still a hell of a lot of campers. Who ya looking for?"

"A student of mine, he was house-sitting for me."

"Local kid?"

"I don't know, actually."

The trooper looked me over, red swollen eyes and rumpled, slept-in clothes, and drew his own conclusions but was too tired to care. "Probably went home to his folks if they don't live around Philly. They're telling everybody to call in with the info of where they're at as soon as they get to wherever it is they're going. There's a phone number for every letter of the alphabet. A couple more days, if the kid does like he's supposed to, you'll be able to track him down."

"Sounds pretty well worked out," I said vaguely. A couple of days, IF he was okay, and no way to find out if he wasn't.

"It's a goddamn miracle is what it is," said the trooper fervently. "That goddamn Congressman, Terry Carpenter, that son of a bitch was just waiting for something like this to happen, I swear to God, must of been. He had everything all thought out and ready to go. He commandeered the suburban trains in Philly, the busses, all the regular Amtrak trains and the freight trains too, that were anywheres around, and had 'em all rolling within a couple hours of the accident, got the hospitals and so forth emptied out, and look at this here—" he waved at the six lanes of cars contracting into four, but moving along pretty well, at about forty

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"—it's the same back in Philadelphia except at the ramps and like that." The trooper put his cap back on. "I got to get back to work here. Don't worry about your little pal, he'll be okay. You got someplace to go? I can give you directions to a refugee camp."

"No thanks, I'm fine." It was stupid to resent the trooper for what he was thinking but I did all the same.

I edged my car into the stream of traffic being guided back the way it had come, but at the first exit slid out of formation and onto a little road that headed off into the mountains. I drove along for several miles, looking for a town with a phone; but when I finally found one, in front of a closed-up shop in a closed-up town, there was still no answer.

That was crisis time, there and then. I don't know how long I stood beside that phone kiosk while the battle raged. At one point several busloads of Amish families went by, probably headed for relatives in Ohio; they stared out, faces blank and stony; for them too it was the end of the world. The wind had only held SSW a little while before shifting to southwest, but that was long enough.

Finally I got back into the car, turned it around, reentered the turnpike by the eastbound ramp, drove back to the roadblock, and found my trooper. He stood still and watched me walk up to him, too beat to show surprise. "Look," I said, "I'd like to go in and help search for the people that got missed. They must need volunteers. I'm volunteering."

Very slowly he nodded. "If that's what you want. Go on into Harrisburg and talk to somebody there. Get off at the Capitol, there's a trooper station set up around there somewheres, you'll see it. Maybe they'll take you. I'll radio ahead so they know you're comin'." I thanked him and started to leave; he called after me, "Listen up a minute, bud. Later on it might be too late to change your mind. We might be moving people out of York and Harrisburg if the wind shifts again."

"I understand," I called back, and felt him watch for a minute before moving to his car to use the radio.

In Harrisburg I talked fast and they took me—took me also, at face value, for a youthfully middle-aged man. They issued me a radiation suit, and minimal instructions, and flew me into the contaminated zone along with a batch of other volunteers, a few Quakers and some workers from Three Mile Island.

We were dropped in Center City, fifteen miles from where I needed to be. They didn't like to spare any people for the suburbs, but emergency volunteers are hard to control and some of the others were looking for friends or relatives too. In the end they let each of us take a police vehicle with a loudspeaker and told us to make a mad dash for home, then drive back slowly into the city, keeping the siren on and picking up stragglers as we came.

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I'd only made it a little more than halfway home when I ran out of gas. The damned van burned ethanol and I'd been driving some kind of electric or solar car for thirteen years, but even so . . . I tore off on foot in my radiation suit to find a filling station, looking I'm sure exactly like a space invader in a B-grade flick, trying to run along the deserted street—not deserted enough, though: when I got back with a can of ethanol half an hour later, streaming with sweat and nearly suffocated, the van was gone. Like an idiot I hadn't taken the keys. I heaved the can into a hedge and started walking.

I was seven miles from home, give or take half a mile. Just as I set off, the sun came out. I had to pee badly and didn't know how (or whether) to open the suit, and I was already terribly thirsty.

That walk was no fun at all. I had to rest a lot. I also had decided that wetting the suit was preferable to the consequences of any alternative I could think of, which made the hike even more unpleasant than it would have been in any case. It was more than three hours from the time I'd left the van when I finally got home. The key was in my pocket but I couldn't get to it; I ended up breaking my own basement window to get in.

Eric wasn't there.

I knew the house was empty the instant I got inside. In the basement I leaned against the cool wall, overcome with exhaustion and letdown. After a while I fumbled with the suit till something came unfastened, and crawled out of it, drenched and reeking; I left the suit in the basement with all my seed-starting equipment and insect cages and dragged myself on wobbling knees upstairs, shutting the door behind me.

The kitchen sink was full of water. So were both bathroom sinks and the tub. My feeling of letdown lifted; he'd followed instructions then, that probably meant he'd gotten safely away. Good old Eric. I drank a couple of liters of water from the sink before stripping off my vile clothes and plunging into the full, cool tub. Might as well die clean.

Almost instantly I went to sleep. When I woke an hour or so later with a stiff neck I took a thorough bath, got dressed again (this time in my "own" clothes, some shorts and a shirt), realized I was famished, and raided the refrigerator for a random sampling of Eric's abandoned provisions: cold chicken, supermarket bread, a banana, a tomato from the garden. The power was off, but the doors had been kept shut and nothing had spoiled. I drank a can of Eric's Coke, my first in nearly thirty years. It was delicious. In a cabinet I found a bag of potato chips and ate them all with deliberate relish: exquisite! There were half a dozen boxes of baked beans in there—and pickled herring—and a box of cheese— Irrationally I began to feel terrific, as if the lost chance with Eric were

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somehow being made up for by his unintended gifts, the last meals I expected ever to eat. I meant to enjoy them, and I did.

Sated at last, I wandered into my airless bedroom and fell across the bed. Strange as it may sound, I never thought to switch on the transistor, so wholly had I crossed over into a realm governed by the certainty of my own imminent death. I had been fleeing my death for so long that on one level I actually felt relief to believe I could give in to it now, stop twisting and doubling and trying to give it the slip. Nor, still stranger, did I even glance into the garden.

The house was stifling, must have been shut up for many hours. It had been many hours too since people had been told not to run any more water or flush their toilets, though both of mine were flushed and clean. These things pointed to Eric's safe escape and relieved my mind of its last burden. I sank like a stone into sleep. When I woke it was dark, and the house was being battered by the amazing racket of the helicopter landing in the little park a block away.

They'd caught the person who had pinched my van as he was trying to cross the Commodore Barry Bridge into New Jersey. A police van is a conspicuous object to steal, but he'd been offered no alternatives and didn't mind being apprehended at all, so long as his captors took him out of danger. He'd seen me stop and leave the van, waited till I was gone, then poured fuel from some cans in his landlady's garage into the tank and taken off, while I'd still been hoofing it up the road. Inside the helmet I hadn't heard the engine start. It seemed less reasonable to steal the van outright than to beg a lift, but people act oddly when their lives are at stake and that was how he'd chosen to play it—a white man in his fifties, no family, a night-shift worker who had somehow slept through the evacuation. In fact, the very sort of person I'd been sent to pick up. All this I learned later.

It had taken time to trace the van, and everybody was plenty busy enough without coming to rescue the would-be rescuer, and they didn't even know my name. But I'd mentioned the name of my development to one of the other volunteers, and its general location near the campus, and eventually they sent the helicopter out to find me. It wasn't till I was out of my suit again that anybody realized the man they'd come to find had metamorphosed into a woman.

The rest is all aftermath, but I may as well set it down anyway.

I lived for a month in a refugee camp near Kutztown, Pennsylvania, on land owned by the Rodale Research Center; I chose it for that reason. By month's end it was obvious that Greater Philadelphia was going to be uninhabitable for years—maybe a decade, maybe more.

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A month to the day after the accident they sighted the returning Hefn ship.

I took a pretty high dose of radiation. My chances of developing leukemia in fifteen or twenty years aren't bad at all. However, I don't expect to be around that long unless I accept the Hefn's offer (of which more later).

One day in the camp they paged me, and when I got to the admin tent, who should be standing there in pack, tee shirt, and shorts but Eric Meredith. I'd found out, quite quickly, that he had indeed gone to relatives in Erie with the first wave of the evacuation, and had sent him a letter saying how relieved I was that he'd gotten away safely. I'd mentioned that I would be staying at the Rodale Camp for a while. Eric had come all that way, not to collect his bonus (as I thought at first), but to deliver the contents of his backpack: a complete printout of the records of my experiment, this season's preliminary notes on disk, and six seriously overripe cantaloupes containing the seeds of *Cucumis melo reticulatus* var. Milky Tango, the hybrid melon I'd had the highest hopes for, saved by his quick thinking from the radioactive rain. "I didn't know how to get the tough disk out of the computer," he apologized.

I stared at the bagful of smelly spheres on the table before us with the oddest emotion. For part of a day not long before I'd surrendered, I'd given up my life. By purest luck my life had been restored to me; but I had crossed some psychic boundary that day, and had never crossed back again. And Eric and the experiment both belonged to the time before the accident, when fighting viral diseases had been most of what I cared to do.

It only took one step to close the distance. I took it, put my arms around that bony, sinewy, beanpole torso and held myself against it for a moment out of time. Eric stood stiff as a tomato stake, and about as responsive, but I didn't mind. "Eric, do me a favor," I said, letting go of him and stepping back. "I'll take half of these, you keep the others. Plant them in your grandparents' back yard next summer. Finish the experiment for me."

A coughing fit made me break off, and Eric unstiffened enough to say, "Are you okay? That cough sounds terrible."

"I'm fine now. I had a cold, then bronchitis. Listen: the soil at my place will be contaminated for years, and God knows when I'll get another yard to grow things in. The college may reorganize, but it hasn't been decided whether or where. Not in Delaware County, though. Will you be going on down to University Park?"

He nodded. "Next week. They're letting us start late."

"Good, then you just have time to collect yourself a supply of cucumber beetles. You can expose them to mosaic later if they haven't already

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picked it up." The poor kid was staring, unable to believe what was happening. "I'm perfectly serious. Look: *you* saved the data and the seed. I was in the house for eight hours or so myself and it never crossed my mind to try to rescue either one." This was true. The only thing *I'd* thought to rescue, when the helicopter came, had been my fake penis. "You've earned the right to finish the work. But don't feel you have to, either; the Rodale people will be glad to take over, or a seed company would."

"Oh no, I *want* to! Really!" he protested. "If you don't that is—but you could make money from this. It isn't right."

"Tell you what. For safety's sake, let's have another copy of these records made and print out the ones from this summer. I'll hang on to half the seed, as I said. If you don't produce salable results I'll see that somebody who might gets my copy and the seed; and if you do get results we'll split the money down the middle. How does that sound?"

The camp had several notaries. We wrote up an agreement and got one of them to notarize our signatures. I wasn't even sure it was legal—Eric was only nineteen or twenty—but never mind, I thought, never mind!

I walked him back to his car. Still bedazzled by the turn of events, he let the window down to say earnestly, "Nobody *ever* gave me anything this important before. I don't know what to say."

"You gave me something important too."

"*I* did? When? What was it?"

I thought of trying to tell him just what, thought better of it. "Cold chicken. Potato chips. Baked beans. Coke."

It took him a minute to realize what I was talking about, but then he objected, "That's different! That's not the same thing at all!"

"Less different than you know. Think about it, eh?" And then, a bit rashly, "Think about *me* once in a while."

Last month I attended Eric's graduation from Penn State: *Magna cum laude* in biology and a graduate fellowship to Cornell. For a boy from the nether regions of academe, not bad at all. Maybe he'll do with his life what I'd have done with mine if things had been different. Eric's final proof of Milky Tango's tolerance to mosaic under a wide variety of growing conditions earned him his classy degree, though he gave me full credit for my own work, to which his was only the capstone—but a beautifully cut and polished capstone, every bit as good as the one I might have cut myself. I wore a long-sleeved shirt to the commencement, too warm for such a sunny day, to cover the Kaposi's lesions that have spread now over much of my body.

My own research has taken an unexpected turn.

Early last summer I donned a radiation suit and went back home to

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see my abandoned garden and my field trial beds. Everything was a disheartening mess, but that wasn't what I'd come to see. Eric had ripped loose the Ultramay cover on the Milky Tango beds to harvest those six melons. Remnants of the stuff flapped around me as I knelt to look, imagining his haste and fright as he'd scrabbled frantically among the vines while behind him in the house the printer pipped and pinged. But such thoughts weren't what I'd come for either.

The rest of the Milky Tango seedcrop had eventually rotted where it lay, and the seeds had been directly exposed to the elements all these months. I'd been reading a lot about using fast neutrons, X-rays, and gamma rays to induce desirable mutations in plants, including disease resistance, and had begun to wonder what effect the fallout might have had on my own already highly resistant muskmelons. I wanted to know whether any of the accidentally irradiated seed had made it through the winter and germinated, and so did my new bosses at the Rodale Press, who were paying for this expedition. Our Hefn observer was interested too—enough to come along and help.

Sure enough, there were about two dozen volunteer seedlings growing in the Milky Tango plots. Some leaves showed signs of moderate beetle damage but not enough to set the plants back much. With Godfrey's help I transplanted each seedling, radioactive soil and all, into its own large peat pot brought along for the purpose. Back at the Research Center we planted the lot of them at a special site set apart from the other trials and waited to see what would happen.

While we were waiting I got sick. Before that, the eighteen months between the Peach Bottom accident and my illness were my happiest ever.

When Penn State made the decision to disband the Delaware County Campus, they offered to try to place the tenured faculty at other branches of the system; but by then the Rodale Press had offered me a job. I'd been writing for their magazines for years and knew a number of Rodale editors and writers through correspondence, so it was natural enough that they should think of me when an editorial slot opened up that September at *Backyard Researcher* magazine, the newest member of the Rodale family of publications.

I can remember when all this part of Pennsylvania was farmland, and Kutztown a tiny college town with one main street, one bad motel, and one decent restaurant. But high-tech industry like AT&T and Xerox had moved in, changing the character of the area completely. When I came here to live, the Research Center had become a green island in a sea of development. I moved into one of the old farm buildings at the Center and commuted to my job in Emmaus, where the Press was located. Living out at the Center made it easier to keep an eye on my new experimental

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garden. No more battling with diseases now; the project I devised had to do with increasing yields in several kinds of potatoes. No more hyperpure living, either: the potato chip and I were strangers no longer. No more Companions; we were scattered to the winds, but the new friends I made here knew about my condition. No more celibacy: for a while, one of these friends became my lover.

When the Hefn returned and decided to take charge of us, they looked around for pockets of sanity and right action in the general balls-up we'd made of things, and so they were interested in the Rodale enterprise and in sustainable agriculture generally—enough to assign us a permanent observer/advisor, and that was Godfrey. He moved into the farmhouse with me. When I got sick he knew about it; when the lesions appeared he asked about them, and the disease they meant I had. It's because of Godfrey that the search for a "cure"—fallen on very thin times since the numbers of still-living victims had dropped below ten thousand—has taken off again.

It looks pretty promising, actually. They've found a way to paralyze the enzyme that the virus uses to replicate in the cell—not like zidovudine and its kindred, which only slowed the enzyme down, but a drug that stops it cold. There's no way I'd still be alive by the time they finish sanding the side effects off the stuff, not in the natural course of things. But Godfrey's had another idea.

You know that, like cucumber beetles, the Hefn hibernate—and that their bodies use chemicals pretty much the same way ours do? Well, Godfrey figures it should be possible to synthesize a drug—using a chipmunk or woodchuck model in conjunction with a Hefn model—that would put the ninety-five-hundred-odd AIDS patients and AB-positives to sleep for a couple of years, until the cure can be perfected. There's a problem about testing the stuff if we *all* take the cold sleep, because of course the bosses, the Gafr, won't let them use animals. So we might be asleep for quite a while—or forever—or be damaged by the procedure. But the Gafr have given the go-ahead, and I'm thinking seriously about it. The Kaposi's can only be treated effectively with radiation, and I've had much more than my fair share of that already. I'll die of cancer anyway, probably sooner than later; in a month I'll be forty-nine. But I'm thinking about it. I wish they'd come up with this before, is all. .

I have to tell you something funny. One of my irradiated melon plants turned out to be one hundred percent *immune* to mosaic! It's peculiar in other ways that make it useless for commercial purposes at this point, but the Rodale breeders are sure to keep working on improvements. I mentioned before that like all cucurbits melons produce separate male and female flowers, the male flowers bearing the pollen-producing stamens, the female flowers the pistil and ovary. Ordinarily it's easy to tell

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which is which, because the ovary behind the female blossom is a large hairy structure and the male flower has nothing behind it but a stem.

Well, the immune melon bears male and female flowers that look exactly alike! You can't tell them apart, except by peering closely at the inner structures or tearing off the petals, because the ovary is tiny, and concealed entirely within the flower. The fruit is correspondingly tiny, about the size of a small orange—much too small to appeal to growers, though I'd think home gardeners might raise it as a novelty.

I've given this new cultivar the official name of Tiny Tango, a name to please the seed catalogue writers. Privately I think of it as Male Impersonator (or sometimes—a pun—Atomic Power Plant). Its rind is tan and thin, netted like the rind of an ordinary cantaloupe, and its flesh is a beautiful deep salmon-orange, as sweetly, intensely delicious as any I ever tasted. ●

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LAURA GUTH
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR, SUBSCRIPTIONS

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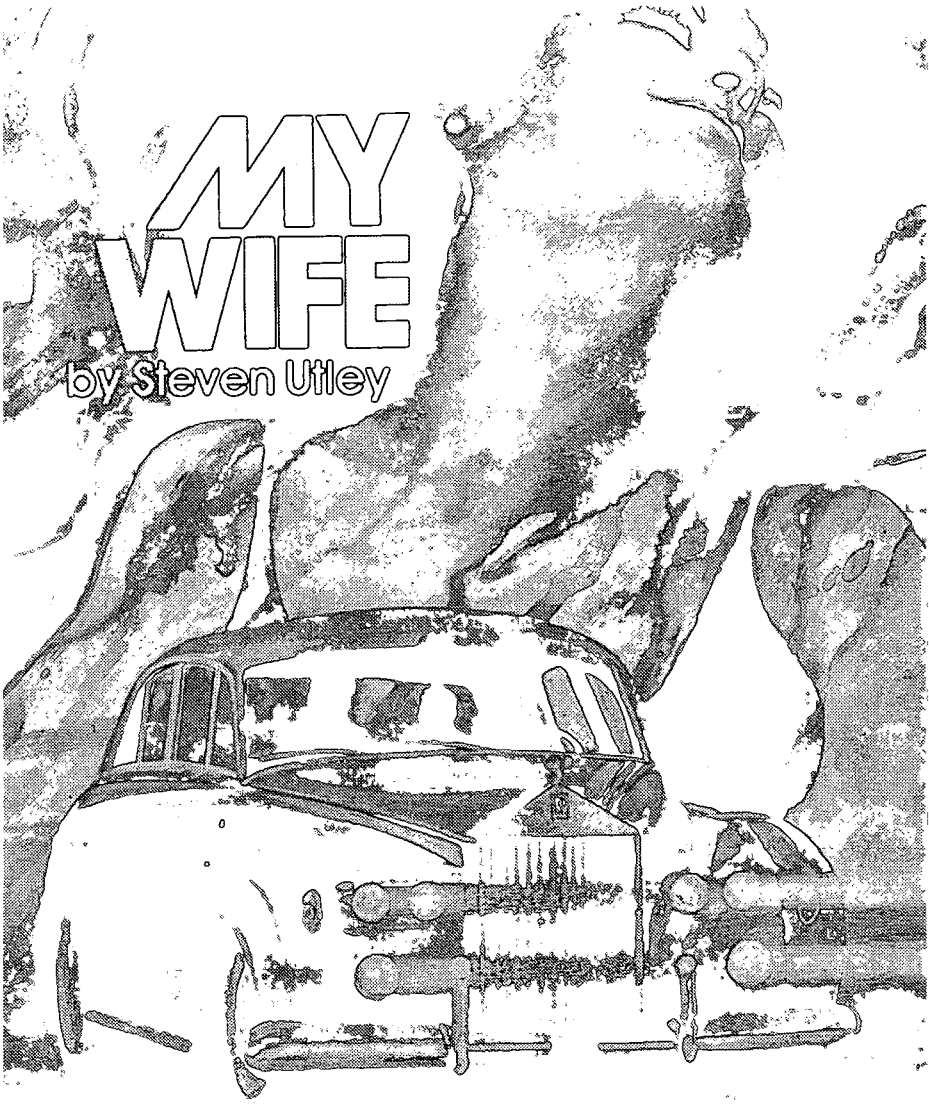

Steven Utley is a part-owner of a substantial portion of Howard Waldrop's forthcoming collection, *Custer's Last Jump & Other Collaborations*. Mr. Utley's first story for *IAsfm*, "Time and Hagakure," was published in our fourth issue (Winter 1977), and will be reprinted soon in our own *Time-Travelers* anthology (Berkley). The following is his second tale to appear in our pages, and we seriously hope we won't have to wait another twelve years for his third.

art: Robert Shore

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The sea was a very clear blue, and Windom, standing by the water's edge with cold foam sometimes between his toes and sometimes about his ankles, could see the woman's shadow moving beneath the waves.

She broke the surface twenty yards offshore and swam smoothly, rolled with deliberate grace onto her side, onto her back, pulled her knees up, went down under again. After a moment, he belatedly began to count, one thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three. He counted, marveling, all the way to one thousand and eighty-eight before she surfaced again.

The woman stood up in knee-deep water and began wading shoreward. She was small, trim, and as dark as stained wood. Her face and shoulders and breasts seemed to incandesce as beadlets of water on her skin caught and reflected the light. It took her until midnight to wade ashore. The sun descended in a smooth arc across the western half of the sky, his shadow stretched, the sky reddened and then purpled away to blue-black. Silvery crescents rolled in from the horizon to lap at luminescent white sand. A blood-red moon appeared low over the Gulf of Mexico. It *was* the Gulf, of that much he was now certain. And this was his beach on his barrier island, and a house a hundred yards to his left was his beach house on that island. And the woman wading in his Gulf of Mexico was his wife, and the sight of her first filled him with rapture and then made his heart feel like a hot stone in his chest.

I never knew you could hurt me, he thought. I never knew you, of all damn people in the world, could hurt me so bad. Or make me so mad.

The temperature had dropped. Windom realized that he was dressed in a white or light-colored robe and had another folded neatly over his arm. He tossed it to her and said, Too chilly to be running around naked.

She snatched it out of the air, then looked at it warily.

It's just a robe, he said. You look like I just tossed you a badger.

Who's ever sure with you, Win?

Put it on, he said as the stone rose in his chest, searing, strangling, before you catch your death of cold.

She shook the robe open and draped it about her shoulders, then hunkered down on the sand about ten feet from him and began drying her hair with a sleeve.

Sweet clarinet music drifted from the house.

Old music, his wife said, smiling at last.

Encouraged by the smile, he moved closer and offered her his hand. She took it gravely and let him draw her to her feet. Feel more kindly all of a sudden, he said, or just cold?

Music hath charms, she said.

Love conquers all.

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A stitch in time. A fool and his money. Early to bed. She gave his hand a quick squeeze. Nice dreamy tune, Win. "Smoke Rings."

You probably own it. In among all those old music catalogs I got you for our paper anniversary.

Owning it's not the same as just listening to it and liking it.

Well, I knew how much you like that old stuff.

"Smoke Rings" faded into something else. She hummed along with it for a moment, sang softly, "It must have been moonglow that brought you to me," and cut herself off with a laugh. Or is it "brought me to you"?

Whichever. Makes about equal sense either way.

She stepped closer, slid her hands and arms under his robe, embraced him tightly. She was hot against his skin. He felt her breasts flatten against him, and there was a tickle of lust down below that unaccountably dismayed him.

What's wrong? she said as he tried to pull away. I thought you wanted me.

Yes. No. No. This isn't what I had in mind.

She reached down and touched him. *This* this? Her touch became a grip. Don't know whether to use it or ignore it? Her fingernails began to dig into him. He tried to push her away, but she seemed fused to him and rooted to the earth. I thought you wanted me, Win. Isn't that why you said you'd never let me go?

I loved you.

No, Win.

You're the only thing I ever loved.

No, and she tightened her grip.

The only thing.

That's the trouble. I *wasn't* a thing.

You're my wife.

No, Win. Was. *Was.*

Windom screamed as her fingernails sheared through his flesh. Then she spun away, the moon spun away, sky, sea, and beach spun away. Everything turned itself inside out and atomized into fine gray mist. The scream had come out as a moan loud enough to wake him up. He lay at the damp center of his bed, hating, as always, the brief but real disorientation, the being out of touch and out of control, the sheer helplessness, that followed awakening. This awakening was worse than usual. There was a batholith of sorrow and anger slowly cooling within his breast, and when he remembered that today was the day, he felt not exhilaration but an utterly unWindomish self-doubt.

Call it off, Win.

Let her go.

Let nature take its course.

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Old dream's only in your head, he told himself after many seconds had passed. What's that quote on Kawanishi's wall? Something some other Jap said, or maybe a Korean, with a not-entirely Oriental-sounding name. Younghill Kane. Kang? Khan? Well, whoever the hell, it's something, anyway, about nature and sin and the mind of the West, though, God knows, Kawanishi's only got the mind of the West on his mama's side of the family.

Having given him sufficient time in which to turn over and go back to sleep, the clock quietly spoke. "The time is five twelve A.M., sir. Do you wish to rise now?"

"No," he murmured.

"Do you wish the staff awakened?"

"No."

"Do you wish the light turned up?"

"No. Shut the hell up."

"Very good, sir."

"Jerk."

He had it, finally, Kawanishi's quote, or its gist, at least: To lose control of nature is, in the mind of the West, *sin.*

Damn straight, Windom thought.

Quietly, with as much dignity as power, the Rolls-Royce followed its dark escort through the gate and into the street. Like a lion coming out of its lair, Windom reflected with profound satisfaction. Yeah. With a black panther walking point. He let himself settle by degrees into the upholstery, heaved a sigh of pleasure, stole a glance at the man who sat beside him. The sigh had been lost on Max; the man's expression was one of exasperation commingled with resignation.

The helicopter, Windom thought, it's still the goddamn helicopter, and murmured, "Rule number one, Max."

Max leaned slightly toward him. "Beg your pardon, Mr. Windom?"

"Rule number one. Never let anybody see you're impatient as hell. Not about anything." Max blinked bemusedly and seemed to catch himself just short of shaking his head. Windom had to smile. He reached over and gave the man a friendly pat on the arm. "Oh, sit back and stop fretting. Enjoy the ride. You've *got* to learn to relax."

Max sat back. He did not appear to stop fretting or to enjoy the ride.

Oh, Max, my man, Windom thought, you're never going to be more than a high-priced flunky. A taker of someone else's dictation, a runner of someone else's errands. Damn, you aren't even a good ass-kisser. No grace. No style. You frown too much, and you've got no talent for putting forward a good idea in such a way I think it's *my* idea. And sometimes you forget who you are and who I am. Really, now. *Insisting* that I use

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the helicopter. Get us there faster, sir. Bad road traffic today, sir. No class, Max. A Rolls-Royce is one of the very good things in life, always has been but now more than ever, what with everybody else putting around in those damn plastic three-wheelie things. I wanted a Rolls-Royce all my life, and now I've got a whole goddamn fleet of the things, including the last one they ever made, the very last one. And I'm damn good and well going to *ride* in them. Anyway, helicopters are ugly, and they make my head hurt. Upset my stomach, too. Can't think with all that damn chup-whuck racket.

God*damn,* Max, give me a break today. . . .

Bit peevish, eh, Win? Bit on edge? Got up on the wrong side of the bed, did you? Little things conspiring to take all the fun out of this day of days?

Settle down, Win. Enjoy. Celebrate.

And give some credit where it's due. Max always keeps his head. No class, no grace, but a memory like a trap and goddamn good reflexes. You can nettle Max, but you can't make him flinch under fire. He found her, didn't he? Found her in time for Kawanishi to go to work on her while you stood around looking like you'd just got drop-kicked in the gonads. Which is about true, in a manner of speaking.

I made you, Max, and I'll keep you. You're the most loyal and trustworthy son of a bitch I've got. You're the only son of a bitch I've got who I like. You'll always be *my* flunky.

He heard the buzz of the car telephone and heard Max answer it but did not move until the other man said, "It's Pete Clements, sir."

Windom pinned the speaker under his chin. "Go ahead, Pete."

"It's trouble with Fisackerly, sir." The silence of embarrassment filled the receiver. Windom, staring at the pulsating red scramble indicator set among the telephone buttons, decided that Pete was probably chewing his moustache.

Slowly, icily, Windom said, "He threatening to stall the Brazil thing if he doesn't get his way?"

"He's sure making some noises to that effect, yes, sir."

"Now, Pete, it's your job to keep him from making noises."

"I realize that, sir. But he's very stubborn. He says he'll only talk to you."

"Well, damn it, Pete, you go *un*stubborn him." Windom frowned at his own tone of voice and felt Max's gaze on him. Rule number one, he cautioned himself. "I can't—I don't want to talk to him right now, so you just put him off for the rest of the day. How is up to you. Just keep the greedy little bastard busy so he can't flush two years' work down the crapper. Sit on him, if you have to. Brazil'll keep for the afternoon." Till I tend to little missy, he said to himself. With the thought came a small,

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quick stab of pain in his chest. He winced and repressed a gasp and hoped that Max hadn't seen, that Peter hadn't heard. Not my heart, boys. Just my *heart*. "Look, you keep Fisackerly occupied. I don't care how you do it. Look in his file. Under the sex stuff. Find something he likes and give it to him. Or blackmail him with it, I don't care which. For crissake, Pete, just *handle* this."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Windom."

Windom handed the telephone back to Max and exhaled sharply. The muscles in his neck and shoulders ached with tension. He felt as though he were trying to balance on one foot atop a large ball. Motion in any direction was an invitation to disaster.

This Brazil thing's gonna kill me, he thought. I'm getting too old for this kind of crap. He ground his teeth in annoyance. No, no. Think that way, you old fart, and you may as well crawl on into your grave and not bother sending Kawanishi a forwarding address. Been working on this deal for two years, and someone'll collect your balls if it gets loused up now. You're too old to go to prison. Now *that*'ll kill you. Yeah, well, but first I'd collect some balls of my own. Fisackerly's, Pete Clements', don't care whose. Sooner or later, I'm going to cut that bastard Fisackerly's throat anyway. Corollary to rule number one: the impatient, the hasty, the indiscriminately ruthless, the, ah, the desperate can always be had. It's just like in judo. Keep 'em off balance, and you can do anything you want to 'em. Fool 'em, buy 'em, whatever. Erect an overpass on their face, if you have to.

He looked out through the one-way window glass, at the glorious sprawl of Houston. That's how I got you, toots. All those oil boys and developers, all the rest of those dick-heads, they just crapped all over themselves when you started to go under back in the eighties. And I got you away from them, just a little piece here, a little piece there, then whole big chunks, I got you and everything and everyone in you, and I made you the goddamnedest greatest city in the world. And you're all mine, babe. The jewel in my crown. To have and to hold.

And you've always been loyal to me, *good* to me. You never broke my heart.

His eyes were stinging. Everything beyond the window blurred. He kept his head turned away from Max and waited until his eyes cleared, and when they had, there, comfortingly, was his city again. And what I've done here, he thought savagely, I can do anywhere on the planet. Have and hold. Forever. Been to every continent on Earth. Been to the Moon, too. Own pieces of them and it. Own about a zillion square miles of continental shelf. Man who doesn't's got no business owning Rolls-Royces. Own some of everything worth owning. Presidents've called me Win. One of 'em wanted me in his cabinet. Owed me. Owned him. Not

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too bad for a kid from a trailer park in an armpit town like Garland, Texas. Not too bad at all, and more's better, more's always better, so here's to the Brazil thing.

But, sweet Jesus *Christ,* just leave me the hell alone about it for right now. Right now, I got to see a man about a zombie.

Kawanishi looked tired this morning and lacked his usual ebullience. Under different circumstances, Windom would have been grateful: the doctor's sunny good nature had always given him a royal pain in the ass. The day was rapidly, irrevocably souring in Windom's mouth, however. At first it had seemed that the prize was in sight, almost within reach. Then Kawanishi had begun to drone on, on, and *on* about glycerol and the limbic system and other arcana, proceeding with a deliberation that made Windom want to grab him by the lapels and scream, Get to the *point,* for crissake, until he realized that Kawanishi gradually *was* getting to the point: only Windom's most realistic expectations, and not his most cordial hopes, had been fulfilled.

Barnes was present, too, and that just made things worse. Barnes had always got on Windom's nerves. She was in her early fifties, tanned, fit, with brilliant silver hair. He could imagine her jogging, playing tennis, swimming laps. It was that damned sympathetic expression of hers that he disliked; she had, he felt, worked so long and so hard at perfecting it that it was permanent; looking at it made the muscles in his own face tired. She wore a simple gold wedding band. He could imagine her lying beneath or sitting astride Mr. Barnes, looking sympathetic.

To avoid having to see her, to get as far away from Kawanishi's soporific droning as possible, Windom stood fuming before the tiers of monitors set into the far wall of the room. They did not offer much in the way of distraction. A ruler-straight yellow line crossed the lower row of screens, seeming to leap the gaps between display terminals. Approximately every five minutes, a muted but cheerful beep would sound as a minute peak ran across the section of yellow line appearing on the rightmost screen. Mounted above were television monitors. One offered a view of the cryogenics chamber, another, a close-up of the chrome cocoon that was the chamber's main feature. He could not see the sleeper in the cocoon, but he knew that she lay in it, dreaming no dreams, more patient than a stone. Now, as before, Windom found it somehow disconcerting that any room so cold should not look cold. It seemed to him that there ought to be a thin sugar-crust of frost on the cocoon and on the walls of the chamber, and that, despite their pressurized thermal suits, the two technicians hovering about the cocoon ought to exhale steam. That there was not and that they did not added an edge of irrational irritation to an already sharp disappointment.

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Finally, he could bear Kawanishi's monologue no more and snapped, "You said she'd be alive!"

"Yes. Of course she is alive."

"She's still frozen. She's hard as rock."

Kawanishi seemed genuinely surprised by the complaint. He glanced at Barnes, who looked sympathetic. "I've been explaining. Only the brain is functioning. The other organs are still being by-passed, and peripheral circulation is still shut down. We're simulating cardiac action to keep the brain—"

"*Alive,* Kawanishi, you said she'd be *alive.*"

"I-I thought you understood, Mr. Windom."

"I thought *you* understood. I said I want her to live. That means walking and talking, not goddamn 'only the brain is functioning.' I came here hoping for more than charts and lines on screens. I didn't come for a goddamn lecture course in cryogenics!"

"We explained all of this to you at the beginning, Mr. Windom. We aren't just raising and reanimating a corpse. The tissues were outraged. Brain, heart, lungs, liver, spleen. Lymph glands. All of it, everything. The entire complicated machine broke down. Some of it suffered irreparable damage. We haven't just rudely kicked it back into operation." Kawanishi gestured at the monitors, which acknowledged the gesture with a beep. "We had to repair everything. We saved what we could, transplanted what we had to, did our best to encourage a high percentage of function transfer. We can do only so much with cultures. We aren't just salvaging her. We have to rewire her."

"You sound like building contractors I know. Always need more time, more people. Always more money."

Kawanishi stiffened. An angry red spot glowed on each sallow cheek. "The *money* is quite sufficient. And my team is *quite* adequate."

"So how long's it all going to take?"

Off to the side, Barnes said, "Well, our original estimate—" A thought seemed to percolate behind the sympathetic expression. "How long is which part of it going to take, Mr. Windom?"

"From right this instant till the moment when she can look at me and see me and know who I am."

"The original estimate hasn't been changed," said Kawanishi. He sat back in his chair, laced his long, slender fingers together, and seemed to press them very hard against his abdomen for a moment. A knuckle popped softly. "As long as it took with any of the other human subjects. Anything up to a year just to get her body to start taking over from life-support systems. As for getting her back on her feet, so to speak, getting her to talk—"

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"Another year?" said Barnes. "Two? Six to eight months at the very, very least. Bear in mind what the poor woman will have to adjust to."

Windom swallowed hard and let himself collapse into a chair. "Try for the very least."

Barnes shook her head. "I can't guarantee it."

"You guaranteed everything before."

"Not in the way I think you mean."

"She's alive, right? The process works?"

"Better than voodoo."

Windom glared at her. "What?"

"Voodoo. The old way of raising the dead. With chicken blood and candles."

"Damn *straight,* Barnes!" His vehemence made her flinch. "*Not* voodoo! We're *supposed* to be talking highly advanced scientific research here. We're *supposed* to be talking new frontiers of science and medicine here, and some of the most brilliant minds of our age."

"We guaranteed that she'll be able to look at you and see you. We didn't guarantee that she'd know you. You may wait a year or considerably longer than a year, spend more than just several million dollars, and still end up with a—"

"A vegetable?" Windom said. "No. I'm paying for success. I want my wife back. And she's got to *be* my wife."

Barnes cleared her throat softly and said, "And what if she *is* your wife, Mr. Windom?"

"Well, that *is* sort of the point to all this, isn't it?"

"For us, yes. We've restored life to a dead human being. But put yourself in her place." Barnes studied her immaculate fingernails for a moment. Windom remembered his dream and, in spite of himself, shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "To have been a suicide, and then to be suddenly returned to life—"

Windom felt heat and color rise in his cheeks. "My wife had *no reason* to take her own life!"

Barnes started to reply, but he silenced her with an angry wave and an inarticulate sort of bark. She and Kawanishi exchanged startled looks. The monitors punctuated the silence with a beep.

"I've financed this project," Windom said. "Let us all understand, I've bought it, and you, and everything you do. Now I need you to do this thing for me. You think you can just go somewhere else and offer yourself to someone else? Kawanishi'd still be keeping dead dogs in deep freezers out in California. And you, Barnes—"

"We must be frank," Barnes said, gently. "I realize that this must be extremely painful for you, Mr. Windom, but—"

"Shut up!"

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Goddamn it, *control* yourself! Windom dug his fingers into the upholstery of his chair. Rule number one, Win. Not now. Not yet. Later. By and by. A year and a half from now, two, however long it's got to be, just put up with these people as long as you have to and keep your lid on and wait and think about *then.*

Rule number two: (a) reward loyalty; (b) punish ingratitude, incompetence, insolence.

Corollary to (b): take your time about it.

"I want a return on my investment, doctors. A particular return from each of you. My wife restored in body, Kawanishi. My wife restored in mind, Barnes. Nothing else, you understand? Not frankness. Not warnings. You'll get your money, and you'll probably even get your goddamn Nobels eventually." If I don't have you sent to prison for life. If I don't have you wrapped in cellophane. "Meantime, you just attend to my wife. You'll bring her back to me, alive and whole."

Kawanishi compressed his lips into a tight sphincter for a second, then said, "As you wish," and hesitated, and added, "sir." Windom would have sworn that he mouthed the words *and may God have mercy on you.* Barnes' face was blank, set, and yet somehow still sympathetic.

No. Not sympathetic. Pitying.

The cellophane, Windom decided. Definitely the cellophane.

They rose from their seats, and Kawanishi moved to open the door for Windom, who gave him a thin smile and murmured a dry "Thank you, my man." *My man,* you slant-eye son of a bitch, and you'll do what I ask, you and Barnes both, you'll give me back my wife, and then. . .

He paused just inside the door and took a last look at the monitors. One of them beeped, and his smile broadened. And *then,* little missy, he thought. Just you wait, you ungrateful bitch. ●

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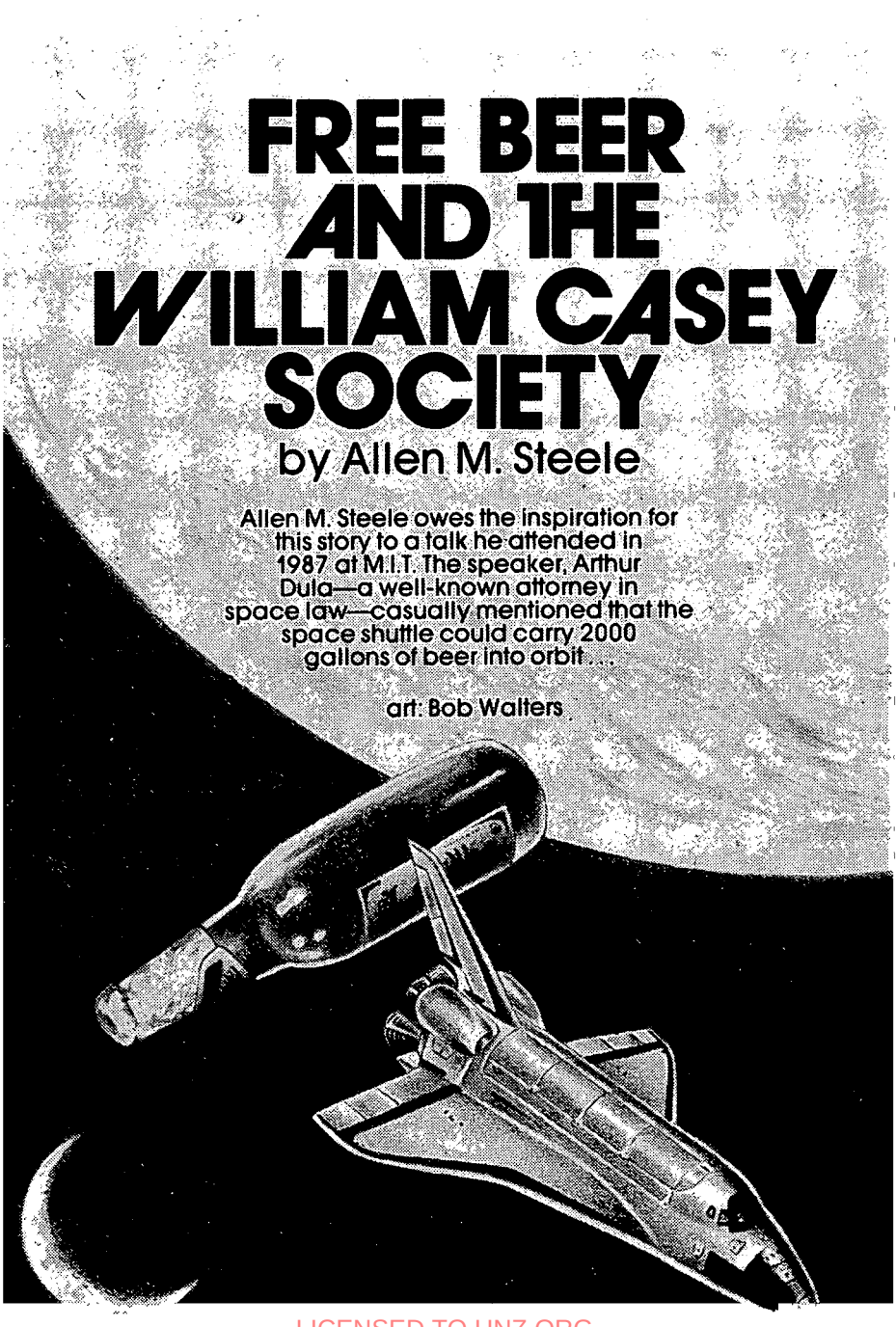
FREE BEER AND THE WILLIAM CASEY SOCIETY

by Allen M. Steele

Allen M. Steele owes the inspiration for this story to a talk he attended in 1987 at M.I.T. The speaker, Arthur Dula—a well-known attorney in space law—casually mentioned that the space shuttle could carry 2000 gallons of beer into orbit....

art: Bob Walters



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Cowboy Bob told me this story one slow Wednesday night while we were hunched over the bar in Diamondback Jack's, so I can't make a strong case for its veracity. If you drink and hang around in barrooms, you should know that half the stories you hear are outright lies, and the other half are at least slightly exaggerated. And one would have to be more than a little gullible to completely believe a former beamjack named Cowboy Bob. Gullible, stoned, or both.

If it weren't for the events which happened after Bob told me about the Bill Casey Society and the Free Beer Conspiracy on Skycan, I wouldn't be bothering to pass this yarn along. I'm a respectable journalist; I don't trade in hearsay. But maybe there's a moral in this story. If not a moral, then at least a warning.

Diamondback Jack's was a hole-in-the-wall beer joint on Merritt Island, Cape Canaveral, about two miles down Route 3 from the Kennedy Space Center. It's a dive for space grunts, which means that it's not the sort of place to take the kids. In fact, tourists, space groupies, execs from the space companies, NASA honchos, and most media people are unwelcome in Jack's. Not that the place is all that attractive: windowless, weatherbeaten pine walls, oil-splattered littered sand parking lot, busted plastic beer sign, clusters of Harley-Davidsons and GM pickup trucks parked outside. It looks like the sort of northern Florida redneck joint where you can get a cold stare for requesting a vodka collins instead of a Budweiser or get hit over the head with a pool cue for fouling someone's shot. Appearances aren't deceiving, either. You're better off drinking in the fern bars down on Cocoa Beach.

But if you can survive a few consecutive nights in Jack's without being punched out or thrown out, you're on the way to joining the regulars: professional spacers whose lives revolve around the Cape and the space business. Shuttle pilots, launch pad ground crews, firing room techs, spacecraft mechanics, flight software writers, cargo loaders, moondogs, the Vacuum Suckers, and beamjacks.

Inside, Diamondback Jack's is all space. On the walls are framed photos and holos of Mark I, II, and II shuttles lifting off, of beamjacks tethered to sections of powersats, moondogs building the mass driver at Descartes Station, Big Dummy HLVs coasting into orbit, Olympus Station revolving like a huge wheel in geostationary orbit above a crescent Earth. The bulletin board near the door is pinned with job openings and torn-out articles from *Aviation Week*. Behind the long oak-top bar, along with the varnished and mounted skin of the rattlesnake that Jack Baker claims to have killed while fishing in the Everglades ("Sumbitch crawled into my boat and I kilt it with my shotgun. Blew the bastard's head clean off."), are snapshots of spacers past and present, dead and alive, unknown and infamous: Tiny Prozini, Joe Mama, Lisa Barnhart, Virgin Bruce

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Neiman, Dog-Boy and Dog-Girl, Monk Walker, Mike Webb, Eddie the Gentle Goon, Sandy Fey. There's a picture of Jack Baker, as a skinny young kid, standing with Robert A. Heinlein, taken at a science fiction convention many years ago. And there's a picture of Cowboy Bob, wearing a hardsuit with his helmet off, sneering at the camera. He's wearing his trademark stetson in that picture.

I think Bob was born with that tan felt stetson on his head. I don't think it could be removed without surgery. Maybe he's got a pointed head underneath. With his white beard, wrinkled eyes and bad teeth, though, he's no singing cowpoke or last noble horseman. Bob was a space grunt. Once he told me he couldn't stand horses.

When I knew him, Cowboy Bob was one of those hard-up, unemployed cases who were regular fixtures in Jack's, pissing away the money they had made years ago as beamjacks on the powersat project. Jack was one of those semi-skilled young turks who had signed on with Skycorp and spent two tough years in orbit on Olympus Station—Skycan, as the vets knew the giant orbital base. They went because the pay was good, or for the adventure, or because they were wanted back home by the law, the I.R.S., or their former spouses. The ones who survived the experience and didn't screw up came home to small fortunes in accumulated back-pay and bonuses. Those guys started restaurants or small businesses, or just bought condos on the Cape and were lazy for the rest of their lives.

Some other vets, though, screwed up and lost much of their pay to fines and penalties. Those guys came back with not much more money in the bank than they had before they left. Most of these grunts left the industry. The ones who stayed, for the most part, tried to find ground jobs on the Cape, or went overseas to work for the Europeans or the Japanese. A handful of diehards tried to get another space job.

Cowboy Bob, the former Utah goatroper who couldn't stand horses, was one of those in the last category. Skycorp wouldn't rehire him, though; nor would Uchu-Hiko or Arianespace. So he took small jobs for the little companies which did short-term subcontract work for NASA or the Big Three. But I don't think he ever left Earth again after he finished his contract on Skycan; his jobs were always on the ground. I always figured that was because of his drinking problem.

So Bob spent his nights in Diamondback Jack's, swilling beer, talking shop with the techs and other unemployed space grunts, making sour-breathed passes at the college cuties who slummed in Jack's during spring break, keeping his feelers out for job leads. Shooting the bull with anyone who would buy the next round. That's how he told me the story, that Wednesday night when the place was dead, about the Skycan beer scam.

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He was already drunk when I sat down next to him at the bar. I signaled to Jack to bring me a Bud, and the first thing Bob said to me was the sort of thing one would expect from an inebriated wreck. Cocking his head toward the door, he asked, "You just came in, didn't ya, Al?"

I nodded. "Did you see any cars parked out there?" he asked.

"Sure, Bob. Yours. Mine. Jack's. Whose car are you looking for?"

He cast me a look suggesting that I had become stupid since the last time he had seen me. "Brown Toyota-GM Cutlass. One or two men sitting inside." He paused, and added, "William Casey Society sticker on the rear window. Remember what I told you last Saturday?"

I shook my head as Jack pushed a tallneck in front of me. "I wasn't here last Saturday, Bob."

(Of course, I didn't say where I had been last Saturday. There's nothing wrong with attending a routine press conference at KSC, unless you're a patron at Jack's. Spacers and reporters have an acrimonious relationship going back to the days when Project Apollo press pool reporters gave NASA a new definition—Never A Straight Answer. Jack used to keep a bag of Morton's salt underneath the counter for the novice journalists who wandered into his bar looking for sources, to dump on their heads as soon as they pulled out their notebooks "so the bloodsucking leeches will wither up and die." My presence was tolerated only because I was low-key about my profession and because I *never* brought my work into Jack's. So the less said about my stringer work for the *Times,* the better.)

"Huh," Bob said, wearing the vaguely puzzled expression of a heavy drinker facing short-term memory lapses. "Maybe I didn't tell you about it." He looked towards the door again. "Well, *is* there a car like that out there?"

"I didn't see one. But I don't think I'd recognize a Casey Society sticker if I saw one."

Now Cowboy Bob had my curiosity worked up. Perhaps that was his intent all along; get me involved in a conversation and cadge drinks off me all night. I decided to play along. It was a slow, humid summer night and I was in the mood for a tall tale.

I got Jack to bring Cowboy Bob another Miller's and I pulled out my cigarettes. Bob took a long hit off his beer, tilted the frayed rim of his hat back a half inch, and leaned a little closer to me. "Did I ever tell you about how we got 444 cases of beer up to Skycan? Well . . . "

Ten years ago (Cowboy Bob told me) his crew was doing the final work on SPS-1, the first large-scale solar power satellite to be built by Skycorp. Almost five years and the labor of nearly three hundred men and women had gone into the project, not to mention about ten billion dollars in corporate investments and government loans. The result was the twenty-

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first century equivalent to the Golden Gate Bridge, a landmark achievement in space construction. All that remained to be done before the beginning of the low-power tests was the final installment of the microwave dish antennas at both ends of the thirteen mile span of the powerstat.

"So we were pretty proud of what we had done here," Bob recalled. "There would be other powerstats, of course, but this was the first big one, and we were the crew that was putting on the finishing touches. That called for some kind of celebration, right? So one night a few guys from the second shift got together in one of the rec rooms and started talking about what we wanted to do. As it turned out, everyone wanted a beer bust."

The problem with that, naturally, was that both Skycorp and NASA had stringent regulations against alcoholic beverages in space being made available to space work crews. The rules were tightly enforced; NASA inspectors searched all outbound orbital and lunar crews for booze, and Skycorp's security cops on Olympus Station had already found and torn out two stills aboard the space station. Skycorp had tried to compromise with the beamjacks' thirst by providing the rec rooms with nonalcoholic near-beer—a weak, watery brew which tasted like chilled boar whizz.

"That just wasn't good enough," Bob said. "I mean, we'd been gagging on that stuff for the past eighteen months. We wanted *real* beer. Budweiser, Miller's, Bush, Rolling Rock, Black Label . . . *anything!*"

He hefted his latest bottle of beer to show what real beer looked like. "At this point, y'know, nobody gave a damn about Skycorp's rules. The job was done, our money was in the bank. Once the last bank of cells was laid down and the antennas were installed, we'd all be shipped home and it would be the end of a long tour of duty. So we were willing to take some risks, break some regs. Who cared? We were entitled to a good blowout, man."

Getting beer onto Skycan entailed a smuggling operation, of course. In the past, Skycan crews had managed to bribe KSC ground crews into packing off-limits personal items into the orbital transfer vehicles which resupplied Olympus Station on a weekly basis. A network of reliable connections at the Cape, therefore, was already in place. But the stuff which had been stashed into the OTVs before they were loaded into the cargo bays of the shuttles—tape players, cassettes, comic books, Monopoly games, and even the occasional fifth of whisky or vodka—had taken up little room in the OTVs and could be easily hidden from NASA inspectors. The more the conspiring beamjacks thought about it, the more they realized that, in order to get enough beer into space for a proper

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party, this operation demanded smuggling an unprecedented volume of contraband into orbit.

"Dog-Boy pulled out a calculator and figured it out," Bob continued. "A Mark II shuttle's OTV had a cargo capacity of 65,000 pounds, which translated to about 1,000 gallons, water or beer. That was about 444 cases of twelve-ounce cans."

He paused and gazed at his empty bottle; I gave Jack the high sign to bring us another round. It looked as if I was going to have to pump a thousand gallons of beer into Cowboy Bob to get the story, which was probably what Bob wanted me to do. But the yarn was getting good and I wasn't about to start being cheap. Jack silently put another round in front of us—he had already deprived Bob of the keys to his jeep—and the former beamjack continued his story.

"Of course, Dog-Boy made that calculation just to give us an idea of what could be done. 'Of course that's absurd,' he said. But once he told us it *could* be done . . ." He laughed, shaking his head.

"You only had about a hundred people up there," I said. "Ten gallons of beer for every crewmember was a little overkill, don't you think?"

"You're missing the point, Al!" Bob slapped his hands down on the bartop. "It wasn't a matter of whether everyone had a six-pack or a hundred gallons. We had just gotten through building a nineteen-square-mile structure in space. There was *nothing* we couldn't do! We were the best space construction crew there had ever been! So it was . . . it was like . . . "

"A matter of pride."

"Hell yeah! It wasn't *having* beer that mattered. It was *getting* the beer, that was the principle. The challenge was the thing." He shrugged and picked up his beer. "So what the fuck? We decided to do it."

So the handful of beamjacks involved in the discussion—Bob, Dog-Boy and Dog-Girl, Eddie the Gentle Goon, Suffering Fred, a few others—got to work in plotting the Free Beer Conspiracy, as it came to be called. There were quite a few obstacles which had to be crossed, the largest of which was circumnavigating NASA and Skycorp. But the obstacle which they didn't foresee was the William Casey Society, personified aboard Skycan by one Leonard Gibson, sometimes known as Lenny the Red.

The William Casey Society, of course, was the extreme right-wing group which had taken up in the new century where the fanatics of the twentieth century—the John Birch Society, the LaRouchians, the American Nazi Party—had left off. Named after an old CIA chief who had died during one of those White House scandals way back when, the Bill Casey Society had become the cause of choice for disenfranchised Communist-haters of every stripe, from conspiracy mavens to shellshocked vets of

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Gulf War II to survivalists disappointed that a global thermonuclear war had not occurred. Fueled by a distrust of the new cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union—particularly in space, as typified by the joint exploration of Mars—and led by a minor presidential candidate named George White, the Caseyites compensated for a lack of political clout with fervor, paranoia, and a few well-placed connections.

Space industrialization had become a favorite target of the Bill Casey Society . . . in particular, Skycorp's powersat project. It was George White's contention that the building of SPS-1 was the first stage in a Communist-backed secret operation to control the world. Skycorp was being backed by the Soviet Union, White claimed, and the SPS network was being established not for use as orbital power stations but as microwave beam weapons. Once three powersats were established over the United States and two were built in geostationary orbit above Great Britain and Japan, Soviet moles in Skycorp and NASA would take control of the SPS system, turn the microwave transmitters against American, British, and Japanese armed forces—namely hypersonic bombers and submarines—and fry them, thus paving the way for Soviet global conquest.

Never mind that SPS microwave beams, designed to relay energy from space to ground-based rectennas with as little environmental damage as possible, barely had the power to blister the paint job on a bomber or a sub. Never mind that the Soviets were building their own SPS system in orbit above the U.S.S.R., or that the Kremlin had better fish to fry—so to speak—than whacky schemes at global domination. But this kind of paralogia always finds an audience, and it keeps the tax-free contributions rolling in.

The Caseyites, to their credit, realized that the SPS construction crews on Olympus Station—the latest generation of high-risk blue-collar all-American hardhats—were unlikely to be Communist sympathizers, but were only guilty of ignorance. This was obviously the soft belly of the commie plot. So the Caseyites went so far as to plant its own agent on Skycan, picking a member from its ranks to go to work on Olympus Station in an effort to convince the beamjacks that there was a plot afoot and to convert them to the Caseyite cause.

That person was Leonard Gibson, a thin and somewhat wild-eyed former arc welder for Martin Marietta, who managed to get a job as a beamjack on Skycan.

"We already had Lenny's number by this time, of course," Bob said, "and we intended to leave him alone."

"What do you mean, you had his number?"

Bob sipped his beer. "He came aboard Skycan, from day one, passing out Caseyite leaflets, trying to make converts out of his bunkmates,

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claiming that certain members of the command crew were Russian sleepers. Lenny used to get into these brain-damaged rants in the rec room about how we were all commie dupes, that sort of thing. He even insisted on changing his bunk assignment regularly, saying that he was being bugged or something."

I shrugged. "There were a lot of weird cases on Skycan. He should have fit right in."

Bob shook his head. "Yeah, but not hostile weird like that. Even Virgin Bruce wasn't *that* twisted. Even the religious fanatics got the hint when to shut up. Lenny the Red thought he was on a vital mission to save the world." He grinned. "We used to have some fun with him, like the time Suffering Fred casually pulled out a copy of *Das Kapital* in the rec room and started reading it aloud. Blew Lenny's mind. That's one thing about fanatics, Al. No sense of humor whatsoever."

So Lenny the Red found himself ostracized. That made his paranoia much worse. Now Lenny Gibson began to suspect that the situation was even worse than George White had predicted; somehow, most of the Skycan beamjacks had been brainwashed, had become *willing* commie dupes. How else could he explain this complete rejection of his claims?

So Lenny the Red changed tactics. Instead of seeking converts, he began to carefully observe the behavior of his fellow beamjacks, watchful for indications that a conspiracy was afoot. Lenny the preacher became Lenny the spy, the guy who sat quietly in the corner, listening, watching, waiting.

"And sending coded messages," Bob added. "The communications officers who worked in Command, y'know, handled the phone calls which crewmembers made to the folks back home. They sometimes listened in for kicks, and they used to tell us about these bizarre calls Lenny would make to some number in Baltimore. 'Tell Aunt Jane to water the begonias. Repeat, tell Aunt Jane to water the begonias. The moon is red. How is Uncle George.' " Cowboy Bob chuckled. "God knows what that shit meant, but they were obviously reports to the Casey Society."

"You didn't get bothered by this?"

"Naw. He was basically harmless." Bob paused and sighed, his eyes rolling up toward the ceiling. "Until he caught the rumors about the Free Beer Conspiracy, though."

"Let me guess . . . "

"Right. Commie plot."

There was little which could be kept secret for long aboard Olympus Station. The space station was enormous, but it was only so large; rumors and hearsay tended to spread quickly among the hundred-plus men and women living in the big wheel, sometimes but not always missing the

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attention of the security team or the station supervisor. In this instance, word seeped out that *something* special was being sent to celebrate the completion of SPS-1. Yet only a small handful of people knew the details. If Phil Bigthorn, the U.S. federal marshall who headed station security, or Hank Luton, the station supervisor, had known what was going on, the jig would have been up; but apparently they didn't, so the conspiracy continued to build itself.

Eddie the Gentle Goon managed to covertly make contact with one of the usual sources for goodies at the Cape, a cargo loader who for years had fattened his bank account by smuggling personal-request items into the OTVs bound for Skycan. (Cowboy Bob wouldn't tell me his name, saying that the same person was still working for Skycan at KSC.) The cargo loader was willing to take the risk, which was considerable, but he also put a large fee on the job—fifty grand up front, overhead costs included. Eddie dickered with him and managed to get the price down to $30,000 through a combination of sweet talk and menace for which the Goon was reknowned, and authorized a transfer of thirty grand from Eddie's bank account to the loader's. The price was still steep, but the co-conspirators grudgingly agreed to reimburse the Goon for the expense.

The date for delivery of 444 cases of beer was to be on or before April 15, the day that final work on SPS-1 was scheduled to be completed. Dog-Boy and Dog-Girl, who had both worked previously as ground crew at the Cape, worked out the rough framework of the plan. They figured that, once the beer was packed into an OTV and the transfer vehicle was loaded into a shuttle's cargo bay in the KSC Shuttle Processing Center, it would be smooth sailing. Under standard procedures, the OTV would not be opened for inspection once the shuttle was mated with its flyback booster and moved to the launch pad. When the shuttle reached orbit, the flight crew would routinely deploy the OTV from the cargo bay and fire its engine, sending it towards Olympus Station as if it were any other resupply mission.

So the hard part was to get all that beer into an OTV, a difficulty compounded by NASA regulations forbidding all alcoholic beverages at Kennedy Space Center. There was no way a beer truck could simply drive past the checkpoints and offload over four hundred cases of beer at the SPC. Not without attracting the wrath of KSC's security cops, infamous for their lack of humor.

Eddie relayed these concerns to the bribed cargo loader at the Cape. The cargo loader's reply, in effect, was: don't sweat the details, we've got it covered. Eddie was also asked if he and his buddies wanted a hundred pounds of beer nuts, cheap.

The cargo loader did his job well. First, he purchased 444 cases from

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a liquor wholesaler in Titusville, apparently explaining that he was planning a little get-together for a few friends. The wholesaler, not asking too many difficult questions, delivered the beer to the loader's house in Cocoa Beach, where the cases were stacked in his garage.

Then the cargo loader approached a few touchable cronies who also worked at KSC and, bribing them for $500 each, managed to enlist their help. He was careful to select Skycorp employees who worked at the SPC, were less than completely honest, and who owned pickup trucks. He found four guys who met that description.

"The big hangup," Bob continued, "was getting an OTV. The cargo manifests for the weekly shuttle flights were scheduled well in advance and were pretty tight at that point. With SPS-1 soon going on-line, the low-orbit factory stations wanted to stock up their supplies. This guy wouldn't and couldn't bump any life-critical cargo, and he couldn't slide any military or scientific pallets off the board without attracting a lot of attention. So for a while there we were stuck. We had the beer, we had the plan, and we had the people, but we didn't have the OTV."

"The Mark III shuttle was in operation then," I pointed out. "It could have gone direct to Skycan, and you wouldn't need to use OTVs at all."

Bob shook his head. "The *Columbia II* and the *Shepard* were big-ticket birds then. Too high-profile for smuggling stuff, and their cargo bays could be opened anytime, even if you could get something bumped from their cargo manifests. We had to use a Mark II like the *Ley* or the *Sally Ride,* which were doing milk runs with no big fanfare. But, y'know, they had LEO ceilings, which meant we had to find an OTV.

"Anyway, Dog-Boy came up with the solution, but Fred and I did the actual engineering. Three OTVs were permanently docked at Skycan, mainly used to ferry stuff over to the construction shack. Fred and I, when nobody was looking, climbed into one of the things, accessed the guidance computer, and plugged in some new co-ordinates that Dog-Boy figured out. Next time the OTV was sent out to the shack, the engine misfired." Grinning, Cowboy Bob sipped his beer. "It ended up in an elliptic polar orbit over the Moon. It was a real bitch to retrieve the thing."

"Oh, ho. Convenient little accident . . . "

"Exactly. Hank Luton had to request an new OTV for Skycan, since we were running three shifts to get SPS-1 finished on schedule and we needed three OTVs to get the job done. Skycorp was pissed, but they managed to get NASA to bump a science payload back a couple of weeks so we could be sent a new OTV. We got lucky. It was manifested for the *Willy Ley,* with launch scheduled for April 12, right on the money."

"Hmmm. But Skycorp doesn't send up empty OTVs, so something must have been bumped from the manifest anyway."

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"Toilet paper, logbooks, frozen food, screwdriver heads, shit like that. Funny how easy it is to misplace that stuff in the warehouse, y'know."

While the Free Beer conspirators were taking care of the OTV problem, though, another annoying hassle came to their attention, one much closer at hand: Lenny the Red, who had taken to spying on them.

"It wasn't hard to figure out that Lenny was keeping tabs on us," Bob said. "I guess he thought he was James Bond, but he was about as subtle as an elephant fart. Fred and the Goon and I would be in the rec room, right? Maybe not even talking about this thing. And here he'd come down the ladder, kinda sauntering across the compartment to sit down real close to us, but being careful not to look our way so we wouldn't notice him. Whistling, for Christ's sake . . . "

"Inconspicuous behavior."

Cowboy Bob sneered. "Nothing about Lenny was inconspicuous. It didn't take a genius to see that he knew something was going on. At first we thought it was funny, 'cause if the Bill Casey Society thought smuggling beer into space was subversive . . . "

He shook his head in disgust and polished off his latest beer. "Anyway, they were definitely dumb to rely on a flathead like Lenny for intelligence, and that was the scary part."

As it turned out, the Caseyites did not know that beer was being smuggled into space. Instead, the Society was once again gnawing on a favorite old bone of the right-wing fringe which had been lying around since the Soviets had launched Sputnik in 1957, that the U.S.S.R. was preparing to place nuclear warheads in orbit in preparation for a sneak attack on the U.S. from space. Apparently the group had discarded one commie plot for another. In any case, the Society had informed Lenny to be alert for such a scheme, if there was indeed an active Communist element infiltrating Olympus Station.

So naturally Lenny Gibson, America's vigilante in space, had discovered just such a plot. There were signs that a nuke would be ferried into orbit aboard an OTV, to be launched by the shuttle *Willy Ley* on April 12.

"Whoa, wait a minute," I said. "How did you know what he was thinking?"

"Remember those coded messages he was sending to Baltimore? Lenny would write them down first in plain English, then rewrite them into code on the same page. Once he memorized the coded message, he would tear up the page and dump the scraps into the toilet in his bunkhouse. But the moron forgot to flush the pot one day."

"So you found the scraps and put the uncoded message together."

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Cowboy Bob nodded, grinning. "Plus he talked in his sleep sometimes. Some secret agent, right?"

"Right." I decided to take Bob's story with a few more grains of salt. The yarn was getting a little implausible. But I wasn't ready to call it total bullshit yet. "So now you knew that Lenny thought you guys were smuggling a bomb up there."

"Yeah. Even though it was funny as hell, it did present another problem. If the Caseyites took Lenny's reports seriously, they might decide to tip off somebody, like at the FBI or NASA. Of course the feds might not take 'em seriously, but on the other hand NASA might not take any chances and might make sure that security at the Shuttle Processing Center was tighter that week. So Lenny was becoming a pain in the ass and we had to take care of him."

Pitching Lenny out the nearest airlock was briefly considered, but dismissed because nobody wanted to take a murder rap, although the idea was tempting. They also discussed tying him up and stuffing him into a suit locker for a few days, but the drawback was that he might be missed from his workshift. The conspirators thought about simply letting Gibson know what was going on, letting him in on the plan so he would be aware that beer, not bombs, was the contraband inside the OTV scheduled to arrive on the twelfth; yet a paranoid like Lenny would probably not believe the truth. Even if he did, it was always possible that he would twist it around so that the beer was being laced with mind-altering drugs by those evil Russians.

"Dog-Girl, bless her, came up with the answer," Bob continued. "Pretty simple, actually. Lenny had to maintain contact with his pals in Baltimore to do any real harm, right? This meant he had to use the phone. Orbit-to-Earth phone calls were rationed items, and you were only allowed to use up so many minutes a month. So we managed to get the communications officers to adjust the phone logs in the computer just a weensy bit so that, suddenly, Lenny was overdrawn on his phone ration for April. No more phone calls, no more messages to Aunt Jane and Uncle George. No secret messages, no word of a commie plot."

"Nice going," I said. "But that just took care of the Caseyites leaking word to NASA. What about Lenny himself?"

"You're getting ahead of me, Al. I'll get to that. Hey, Jack! Another round here?"

Around this time a few more of the regulars were wandering into Diamondback Jack's; some were loitering around the bar watching a baseball game on TV, and a pool game was getting started at the table on the other side of the room. Bob was getting blitzed on the beers I was buying him and I was catching up, so I barely noticed the guy who had

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elbowed up to the bar a few feet behind Bob. He didn't look familiar, but that was the only impression I had of him. He seemed not to be paying attention to us and Bob didn't notice him; the next time I happened to look his way, he was gone. I didn't think about him again until later.

Two days before the *Willy Ley* made its April 12 milk run, the cargo loader whom Eddie the Goon had bribed, with the help of the four other loaders he had paid off, quickly placed 444 cases of beer into OTV OL-3643. The load-in took place during the first shift at the SPC, in the wee hours of the morning of April 10.

For the past week the cargo loaders had been smuggling the beer, a few cases at a time, through the KSC security gates, hidden under camper caps in the backs of their trucks. The graveyard shift at the Cape was more easy-going than other shifts at the launch center; the supervisors tended to huddle over coffee in the cafeteria, so the loaders had no trouble stashing the beer into the OTV. By the time the SPC's shift supervisor finished his early-morning coffee break, the OTV was sealed and was being trucked out to Pad 40 to be loaded into the *Ley*'s cargo bay. The supervisor routinely checked off OL-3643 as ready to fly, not bothering to check inside.

Eddie the Goon received a telegram from his enterprising friend later that day, innocuously informing him that the party supplies were on the way. Goony grin plastered across his face, Eddie told Bob and the other principal people involved in the scam, and they put the next phase into motion by spreading word along the station grapevine: something wonderful was arriving by OTV at the docking module on April 12, at the beginning of the second shift, and a few volunteers were needed at the Docks to get it hauled from the station's hub down to the rim modules.

"You didn't tell them what was coming?" I asked.

Bob belched and shook his head. "Naw. We wanted it to be a surprise. We also didn't want Hank to find out. But we got enough guys to say they'd be there. Everybody knew it was something good."

As anticipated, Lenny the Red got the word through the grapevine. He had realized by now that his messages weren't getting through to Paranoid Central—all part of the commie plot, of course—so he interpreted the subterfuge as the hatching of the conspiracy. Right idea, wrong conspiracy. To the quiet satisfaction of Cowboy Bob and company, Lenny began to get jumpy. He even switched his bunk assignment again.

"We knew that Dick Tracy would be at the Docks when our OTV arrived, of course," Bob said. "He was planning something, though we didn't know what. There weren't any guns on Skycan that we knew of, but maybe he had managed to sneak one up in case he had to assassinate some commies. Maybe he was planning to defuse the nuke all by himself, I dunno. But we just made sure that he was covered when he got there."

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He reached for a cigarette and almost knocked over his beer without noticing. Jack threw us a look of warning which Bob didn't catch either. He was ripped. "So when the day came, at 1100 hours about, there were ten, fifteen guys crowded into the Docks when the OTV hard-docked with Skycan. Eddie and Fred and me and a couple of the other 'jacks were kinda casually floating around Lenny while Chang pressurized the airlock and undogged the hatch, so I got to see Lenny's face when the thing was opened up."

Cowboy Bob coughed loudly, then began to laugh. "Jesus! Was he *pissed!* He was staring with this *look* on his face when Dog-Boy got the covers and the ropes off and started pushing one case after another out into the docks."

Bob drunkenly hobbled off his bar stool. "Man! One case after another! Fred screaming, 'Free beer! Free beer!' And all the guys howling, cracking up, grabbing the cases. Someone opened a can—and you can image how shook up that stuff was, after sitting through a rocket launch—and beer started spewing all over the place, making these big yellow bubbles that flew all around, splattering everywhere, and more guys started appearing, hauling the cases out of the Docks, down the ladders through the spokes to the rim. A fucking riot, Al . . . and in the middle of all this, Lenny, mouth working like a fish, can't believe what's going on, shouts . . . "

Bob shot his arms out wide and yelled, getting the attention of everyone in the bar: " *'This is unAmerican! Where's the goddamn bomb?'* "

"Hey, Cowboy!" Jack snarled from the other end of the bar. "Cool it or I'll cut you off!"

Bob was doubled over the bar, cracking up and breathless with the memory of the scene. He got some control of himself after a few moments. Clambering back on his stool and reaching for his beer, he said, "And that's when we dropped the blanket over him."

Jack Baker gave us one last round of beers and then shut us both off, after first making me walk a straight line to see if I was halfway capable of driving both Bob and myself home. While Cowboy Bob sucked down his last beer he finished his story.

Once Bob, Eddie, and Fred had grabbed Lenny in the blanket and trussed him with nylon cords, they shoved him into an empty suit locker in the Docks and locked it shut. By then the party was beginning to roll down in the rim modules; most of the second-shift beamjacks were logging in sick, and the third shift was looking for excuses. Once it became obvious that a surprise party was in progress and that trying to shut it down would only incite general mutiny, Hank Luton grudgingly called the day off, halting construction work for the next twenty-four hours

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before heading down to the rim himself. He later told the honchos at Skycorp and NASA that a spread of stomach virus had caused the stop-work. No big deal, in the long run; the party only delayed the low-power tests by a day.

Sometime during the celebration, Bob and Eddie and Dog-Girl slipped back to the Docks, hauling behind them two garbage bags filled with empty beer cans. Dog-Girl had already sneaked into the vacant medical bay and swiped one of Doc Felapolous' sedative guns. The three of them opened the suit locker and Dog-Girl tranqued Lenny with a shot to the neck, and once Lenny was in a stupor they untied him and stuffed him into a hardsuit, making certain that he had two full airtanks in his life-support pack.

"We then threw him in the OTV, emptied the bags in there so that there were dozens of empty cans floating around with him, and closed the hatch," Bob said. "Dog-Girl and the Goon reset the nav computer so it would rendezvous with Columbus Station in LEO, and then we fired the sunnuvabitch back to Earth. Never saw him again."

"That was all?" I asked.

Bob, smiling and slumped over the bar, looked at me and shook his head slowly. "Well . . . not quite. See, I taped a note on the back of Lenny's suit, where he couldn't see it or take it off. It said, 'To the Bill Casey Society . . . take your drunk stool pigeon and shove him!' I didn't sign it, but I think Lenny let 'em know who the author was, and I don't think they appreciated my sense of humor."

Neither did Skycorp, which was how Cowboy Bob lost his contract bonus and got nailed with a couple of fines which depleted his payroll. He ended up on the "unhirable" list with the major space companies as a result of the Free Beer Conspiracy. When the hammer inevitably came down, he alone took the pounding.

"But y'know what, Al?" he said as I half-carried him towards the door. "I don't give a shit. Y'gotta have a sense of humor. Flatheads like the Casey jerks . . . they don't have a sense of humor, goddamn fanatics. Following me, telling me I gotta keep my mouth shut. I piss on 'em from a considerable height, and I'd do it again if I could . . . "

Bob threw up in the bushes behind the bar, then passed out in the shotgun seat of my car after mumbling directions to his house. I concentrated on keeping my vision straight as I carefully drove down Route 3 towards Cocoa Beach. It was a quarter past midnight when I drove over the Banana River causeway onto Route A1A, cruising through the beachfront commercial strip of Cocoa Beach. The night was black as space, wet and humid like the inside of a dog's mouth, neon-glittering like the old visions of the high frontier.

A couple of units, a pump and a ladder, from the Cocoa Beach Fire

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Department screamed past us in the left lane as I passed the old Satellite Motel. Bob, snoring in the depths of his drunken sleep, paid no attention, nor did I until we passed the commercial zone and headed into the residential part of town. Then the stranger, the guy who had lingered in Jack's near Bob and me while he was telling me the story, oddly came to mind, for no particular reason. Remembering him, I also recalled something Bob had told me about Lenny Gibson, how he used to hang around in the Skycan rec room, attempting to eavesdrop on conversations. I began to feel uneasy. For no particular reason.

As I turned the corner onto the residential street where Bob told me he lived, I spotted the fire trucks again, parked in the street in front of a small white Florida-style stucco house, practically identical to all the other white stucco houses lining the road. The house was ablaze with fire shooting through a collapsing roof and the firemen directing streams of water through the broken front windows, while people stood around beyond the piles of hoses, watching the blaze. I slowed to a stop behind the trucks and shook Bob awake.

"Hey, Bob," I said. "One of your neighbors has his house on fire."

Bob's eyes cracked open, and he stared through the windshield at the burning house. He didn't say anything for a few moments, just stared.

"It *is* one of your neighbors', isn't it?" I asked, feeling an unseasonal chill.

Cowboy Bob didn't look at me, nor did he laugh, but his mouth twisted into a sad, angry sort of smile. "What did I tell you?" he whispered at last. "Fanatics. No goddamn sense of humor."

True story. ●

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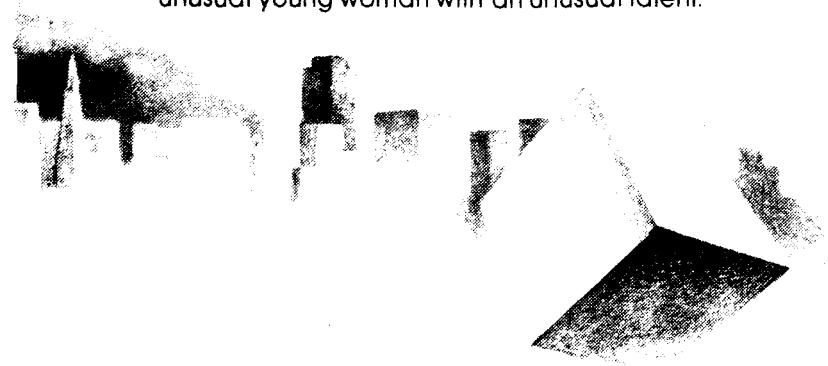
O·ni·o·man·cer (ō′nē ə man′sər) n.: an unusual young woman with an unusual talent.



THE ONIOMANCER

by Lisa Mason

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The Chinadoll denies she's a thief. She swears she's never stolen anything. She finds things, that's all. She's always found things. From the trash bin of the city streets, things come to her, like hungry cats.

So she's delivering an Express Mail 2-Pound Pak to some bigwig at the Hyatt Regency Hotel when she finds the cube. Reporters are swarming all over the place, craning their necks to get a look at the headline of the hour.

Fame scenes cut no ice with the Chinadoll. Just hustling down another zip code, as usual. The suits check out her fuchsia croptop, the fourteen motley loops banging down her hearwings. Lone Ranger mask drawn in kohl across her peepers, beatdown black leather, rude girl rags. Security guards glare at her like she just crawled out from under something, also as usual.

Then there it *is:* a small object getting kicked around, tumbling pathetically across the cold marble floor. The Chinadoll can empathize.

So she scoops.

It's a perfect cube; the size of a medium Rubik's, but iridescent like mom-o-pearl, strung from a stud on its crown with a superfine silvery chain that looks like platinum. It hums, not a machine hum, but a soft, rolling purr-purr.

Little hungry cats. How the Chinadoll loves you.

She stashes the cube in her T-shirt pocket, dashes across the hotel lobby, makes the delivery. The bigwig's got a boyfriend to keep him company, so he doesn't try to come on to her like some of them do. She zooms through the lobby again. Everybody's jazzed, gawking and talking in loud, excited chatter. A voice of authority crackling with feedback issues garbled commands. "Nnnn—be calm, and proceed in an orderly fash—eeee!"

She doesn't stick around to find out what's the trouble.

The cube pokes through her T-shirt pocket like a Picasso nipple. A real find, Chinadoll. Not for nothing is she an oniomancer. And she thought she was down on her luck! She knows right away she can't tell Flash about this. For sure don't let Bulldog see.

Out at the rack she unlocks her bike.

From inside her T-shirt pocket, the cube burps.

The Chinadoll came to see finding as a gift, though she didn't always see it that way. She first discovered finding when she was a sorry little five-year-old named Suki. She may have found things before then, but that's the first time she remembered the finding.

And what came after.

Mama had come home from shopping on Grant Avenue, pink cardboard boxes full of dim sum and fried rice dangling from one hand, a whole

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roast chicken swinging from the other. Papa was inside, watching ninja movies on Channel 60. All Chinatown smelled of Sunday supper.

The kids were in their playground: the street curb in front of Yick Sing Meat Market. Ben and Jimmy fought over a blue paper dragonfly kite. May and Kim whispered over a pocket mirror and contraband lipstick May had bought at Three Spirits Pharmacy.

Suki sat on the curb and sniffed roast chicken. "Go away, baby," May had ordered. Jimmy had pushed her down. So she scratched in the gutter by herself, hummed lullabies, picked at scraps. From the TV inside came clatter and shrill sounds. She could hear the bloodcurdling scream of some ninja lopping off a demon's head, made tinny by Papa's ancient Sony.

And then the finding feeling came: empty cup contentment; waiting but not waiting; nothing-full.

A crumpled wad, stained spit-green, skittered past Suki's toes. She scooped the wad, smoothed it across her knee. She saw small pictures on the crinkled paper strip. There was a tiny antique car and tinier pedestrians; a columned building with a look of importance. On the other side, a curly-headed grandpa who wouldn't look at her, but that was okay. Suki knew white folks didn't look at Chinese unless they had some evil on their minds.

She smiled. She still smiles at that tiny Model T.

From inside the apartment came Mama's wail. "Cheat me! He cheat me! And rent due! I go back!" She ran out onto the street, dragon-faced. Stopped short in front of Suki.

"Oy!" Mama said. "What that you got there, girl?"

Suki held the find up to her.

She snatched the bill from Suki's hand. "So here my ten dollar, Mr. Yee don't cheat me. Where you get this, girl?"

"I found it, Mama."

Mama jerked Suki up off the curb by her skinny arm and hauled her inside. Suki heard May and Kim giggling.

"I said where you get this, girl?" Mama said.

"I found it, Mama. I *found* it."

Mama smacked Suki across the face, one two three times. Suki's lips stung against her teeth. She tasted shame.

"I'll teach you to be liar, girl," said Mama. "Youie? Youie?" Papa grunted, tore his eyes away from the TV. "This girl, this runt, this *accident,* she steal money from her own mama. And rent due. You teach her not to steal, Youie."

"I found it, Papa. I found it!"

Mama slapped her again. Papa stood, unbuckled his belt, slid the leather out of his pant loops. Mama wrestled Suki over the kitchen table,

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pinned her arms down on the greasy oilcloth. Then Papa lashed the belt across her tiny butt, smack smack smack, Suki couldn't count how many times.

That's when she learned not to show or tell.

She would have given up finding if she'd known how. She didn't *try* to do it, any more than she'd made Mama forget birth control on the night five years ago when Papa knocked her up with a fifth child. A pinch-faced, unwanted little Suki.

But not long after her first humiliation, something else tumbled into Suki's hands like the temptation of an evil spirit.

Mama sent her out before dark for some cooking oil. Lipped with arabesques of light, Cathay House Pagoda shone against the scarlet dusk. Suki skipped down Grant Avenue. At the edge of her eye, she saw something. A scrap bouncing across the concrete like any windblown leaf.

The finding feeling came. A ghost-push. Seeing and not seeing.

She scooped.

It was another piece of that funny paper. A cocky, bushy-haired fellow peered at her. Andy Jackson. A twenty dollar bill this time. She could hardly believe it, having only just learned the passion such paper inspired.

She carefully folded the bill and tucked it into her jeans pocket. She brought the cooking oil back to Mama. Later she bought herself a bag of candied pineapple rings at Mrs. Lee's sweetmeat shop, a jade ring at Canton Bazaar, a tiny ivory horse robot at Shanghai Fine Arts, and one of those polyester bags that pass for embroidered silk, all green and purple. She kept a dollar ninety-seven in change. And said nothing to anyone of her new find.

But secrets can be hard to keep.

The streets around the Hyatt Regency Hotel are jumping. State-of-siege cha-cha-cha. The wind socks grit into the Chinadoll's Lone Ranger facepaint. She dodges cop cars, minding business.

She bucks her bike, rolls out onto Drumm Street, tunes in the walkie-talkie. The dispatcher at Speedster & Company calls out one last pickup at 815 Market Street. Shit. That means she's got to pedal her ass eight blocks, and it's nearly five o'clock, and she's cat-o-nine-tails beat.

For luck, she fishes the cube from her T-shirt pocket and checks it out. The closure on the clasp is out of whack, so the lock won't lock. No wonder it got lost. What a cheap piece of trash, this clasp. She can't imagine securing a chain with such fine links to hold a cube of such rare beauty with this cheap trashy clasp.

The cube feels warm, tingling, jingling, like a fistful of hot copper.

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Not for the first time, the Chinadoll wonders how things of value can be treated with such disrespect.

Finding: it was Suki's pleasure, the search for treasure, in the doldrums of daily life. Just a kid, she stalked the streets alone.

And *found* things all the time.

Sure, there was junk. Crumpled wrist computers; she didn't know how many excuses the scamps about town had to fabricate over the loss of lovers' phones. Flat plastic rectangles with tiny holograms and necklaces of numbers; she couldn't calculate how many credit accounts could have been overdrawn. Ziploc bags full of white powders that tasted bad; she would wonder how many illicit dreams were lost in the alleys of the city.

These things meant nothing to a kid. Just junk.

Some things *were* truly treasure, to a kid. Suki filled soupcans with coins. Made a twelve-foot daisy chain out of red and blue rubber bands. Salvaged Seikos with broken buckles, mateless plastic earrings, innumerable paper clips in all sorts of neat shapes, a mom-o-pearl bead choker with a wobbly screw clasp.

She saw treasure everywhere, the hint of it, the glint of it.

She hid everything in a secret place.

Finding seemed so natural in the free-for-all of the city. Maybe the wrong was that she got something for nothing. Mama said they had to pay their dues. Papa said they had to work hard. And finding was so *easy*. That had to be why she couldn't show or tell.

Too easy. She had to wonder if other people found things, too. Surely they must.

In a bold mood one day, Suki asked her sister May, "Hey, do you ever find things? You know, on the street?"

"What do you mean, Suki?" May said sharply. Bad timing; May had seen that Suki had seen her smoking with her boyfriend in Washington Square Park that afternoon. "Find things on the street? Like some bag lady, some street person, some Vietnamese? You stealing again, Suki? You're stealing again, you don't know the difference, you little creep, you spy. Mama!"

Mama searched the bedroom Suki shared with her sisters and found her secret place, the Kinney shoebox beneath her underwear and socks. Mama found all the things she'd found and took them away. Even the jade ring and the ivory horse robot and the purple-green bag, things that Suki had bought, fair and square. She had Papa take off his belt again. And again.

Suki should have known then that she should give up finding, turn away from the shimmer when she saw it. It should have been like any appetite, subject to will.

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But Papa's belt, Mama's slaps, her brothers' and sisters' jeers insulted her, wronged her.

And, like a devil confirming her, not long after Mama took her things away, Suki found her first Big Find. Lying right in the middle of the sidewalk on Broadway near Kearny.

From the corner of her eye she saw the glitter.

Gutterbound daystar. Maybe worthless. Maybe wealth. She guzzled the empty cupful. She scooped.

It was a solid silver key with a handle in the shape of a four-leaf clover. Inside the heavy loop of the clover, next to the jeweler's stamp of authentication, was a Tiffany trademark. The sun-spangled silver dazzled as she turned it in her hand.

Suki knew at once. The key was a sign. A promise that the best revenge would be hers one day. Never mind that the lock the key fit was nowhere in sight.

She walked back through Chinatown in a dream.

The Chinadoll bites the clasp shut, then slings the cube over her fuchsia croptop. The cube nestles down onto her breast, burning like dry ice. She picks up the package at 815 Market Street, drops it off at the Civic Center, then scoots back to the headquarters of Speedster & Company for her daily wage.

She skids Market, slides New Montgomery, bops onto Mission Street. A big evil candy cotton of fog zooms in from Lady Pacifica, chilling her bones. Then her hearwings yow with a bike messenger's cry, an ear-splitting banshee shriek:

"Yee-Yee-Wee-Wing-Foooong—Hah-Hah-Haaaaah!"

Ain't he sweet. That's Flash's yell for the Chinadoll.

After Suki found the silver key, she started a new stash. She found new secret places. When fall term began at Chang Wo Elementary, she kept her treasure chest in her school locker, where Mama could never find it.

She liked school. She didn't understand most of what they said, but she was quiet and did what they told her and kept to herself. She found lots of things in the school halls: bottles of Robitussin-CF, Trojan rubbers, packs of Camels, a pair of soft turquoise mittens spangled with solar chips that kept the winter chill off her hands.

She developed standards. She no longer took the worst junk. She kept three shoeboxes in her school locker, one for junk worth taking, one for cool things, one for valuables. She carried the silver key in her jeans pocket. But she never showed it to anyone.

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And she might have still liked school and done what they told her, if she hadn't found the crib sheet.

All she did was pick up a scrap of wastepaper from where she found it in the girls' lavatory. She didn't know what it was. Just a sheet filled with these teeny tiny rectangles. She stood there gawking, doing a slow eureka. Then a hall monitor swooped down on her before she could explain. The hall monitor hauled her down to the principal's office. Then everyone got dragon and talked at her too fast in English.

Suki got detention for the rest of the semester. A report that she was a cheater went on her permanent record that was transferred when she started Galileo High.

At home, Papa got out the belt. Mama's face got dragon every time she looked at Suki. May and Kim, who were prom queens at Galileo, wouldn't say hi to her in the halls. Ben, who was an assistant manager at Chung Quon Imports, declared everyone in Chinatown knew Suki was a cheater and a thief, and took his belt to her for shaming the family. Jimmy made her lick his shoes.

She ran away. The cops did their own finding and brought her back. She cut school. The principal put her on detention. She flunked classes. Papa took his belt to her until her back scarred.

She tried to reform for a while, did community service, ran errands for Mama. But five-dollar cans of litchi nuts, crystal ashtrays, cashmere sweaters kept tumbling mysteriously into her hands. Store clerks accused her of shoplifting.

On her sixteenth birthday, Galileo High expelled her. Mama said *out.*

Finding; it was Suki's curse.

But as she trudged past Yick Sing Meat Market for the last time, something beckoned, shiny and sweet, at the curb. She laughed and did not laugh; she scooped. It was a gold charm, the kind that hooks onto a charm bracelet. A solid gold ship with three tiny sails, unfurled with golden wind.

The Chinadoll sees Flash's waist-length mane, crowned by the yellow propeller on his beanie, as he ducks down the stairwell into Speedster & Company's basement digs. She does the duckdown too. The digs are full of razzmatazz and doobystench and bike messengers yapping it up. Mohawk greased high over his coffeebean brow, Mug the manager bends over the books of account.

The Chinadoll scores her wages, considers gourmet for dinner. Maybe a Marinetti dry salami and Settler's Creek Chablis, instead of peanuts and Night Train. Hey, she's rich.

Her whoop-dee-doo must be more than her daily sweat and tears would merit, because Flash is eyeballing her, grinning his zen grin.

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"Chinadoll. You *find* something today?"

"No way, Flash. Stash your own trash."

That shit. He of all people would know, just by looking at her, that she Found Major today. Flash is an oniomancer, too.

There's this poignant word of advice from the I Ching that goes, "It furthers you to cross the great water." Meaning, move your ass, fool. Suki's little gold ship with three wind-swelled sails was a sign.

From Chinatown she fled to North Beach, across strip joint row, up Grant Avenue, past the literati cafes, to where the Tower Hotel crouched. She took a room there. Once a bohemian flophouse, the only beats at the Tower now were dead-, not -nik. On the kicked-in front door, someone had taped the sixteenth card of the Tarot, the wicked shrieking, lightning striking, tower of madness tumbling down.

Cozy place.

A room the size of Mama's closet, with a pissy mattress and orthopterous zoo, was thirty George W's a week. The communal john down the hall had special effects.

And then there was her lovely next-door neighbor.

"Hey. Hey. You. Bug," said a voice like a rusted-out muffler. Suki was lugging her small possessions into her room.

Some white kids at Galileo High called the Chinese kids that, so she turned.

"Gimme five bucks, bug."

The ugly hulk blocked her passage in the narrow hall. Her nose came up to the swastika hanging over his leather-vested beerbelly. She gave him three dollars, which was all she had left after the Tower Hotel manager took two weeks' in advance.

Bulldog bullied her daily. He extorted her money, stole her food, dirtied her clean towels. He hid water balloons over her door, set a small rat loose in her bed. Even when she didn't receive his direct attentions, she cringed under his constant presence. The rock he blasted night and day. The rattletrap van he parked in the towaway zone in front of the Tower and revved up at five in the morning, waking Suki with its hacking motor, sending noxious fumes through her window. A steady stream of raucous, raggle-taggle women who, for reasons Suki could not fathom, found Bulldog endlessly fascinating. Notorious dealers, bikers, and roustabouts who came to pay Bulldog their respects and invariably ended up trying to beat his brains out. When the fights started at around midnight, bodies would crash against the flimsy walls like Godzilla taking on King Kong.

Suki considered trap guns, trip wires, poison. A black widow set loose in *his* bed. A pipe bomb under the wheels of the van would do the trick.

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Kablooey! at five in the morning. Or it was just possible she could electrify the communal shower from the phone booth in the hall.

She plotted how one day Bulldog would get *his*.

The Chinadoll clears out of Speedster & Company before Flash can case her much longer. The guy has got an eye for detail, like any self-respecting oniomancer should. If she sticks around, he'll spot the cube nestled under her T-shirt or the superfine chain at the back of her neck.

She hightails it, up Third Street, to Sutter, to Kearny, to Columbus Avenue. Hustles down her humble repast at Rossi's, beelines up Grant Avenue to the Tower. Scoots into her room. No Bulldog in sight, but the rusted-out voice jabbers next door. She deadbolts her door and cools out.

Then she flips the superfine chain up off her neck, takes the cube in her fingers, gawks at it. What a Find, what a strange thing, what a pretty-pretty, so shimmery. Full of wonder, she strokes its iridescent flanks.

The cube begins to glow, pale blue at first, then blushing to violet. The hum loudens from purr to roar. The Chinadoll's fingers sizzle.

Suki would have loved to rely on finding. Make it her career, explore its subtleties, refine her technique until she could call it Art. But rent came due, and she hadn't found so much as a dime for three weeks. As for regular jobs, she had no credentials, no connections, no confidence.

So she became a bike messenger.

Speedster & Company welcomed anybody, as long as you could pedal your ass eight hours a day delivering urgent packages, contracts, and subpoenas around San Francisco, and it wasn't the same kind of peddling ass as on strip joint row. It had some honor. Mug the manager hired her on the spot.

Flash was Speedster's star, the fastest bike in town. A folk legend in his own time. Every bike messenger knew and loved him. To every passing biker, he gave his tribal cry:

"Yee-Yee-Heeee---Hah-Hah-Haaaaah!"

Even the suits knew him, the waist-length hair, ferret face with granny glasses, a red-and-yellow beanie with a yellow propeller that told which way his wind blew. Columnists told stories about him, how he'd broken his arm three times, for speed's sake. One time when he accidentally locked himself out on the exterior stairwell of a first floor office, he'd hopped over the railing and dropped to the concrete, only to be arrested by a passing cop.

Suki wasn't in Flash's league yet, but she razored her own waist-length black hair, bleached it platinum, and added fuchsia streaks. She pierced seven holes along the edge of each ear. She had a skull and crossbones,

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set inside the petals of a rose, tattooed over her left breast. She blew the first Abe Lincolns she could save up on kohl, vintage velvet, recycled leather.

She became the Chinadoll. She found face.

The cube turns scarlet neon. The room vibrates, then lurches crazily. The Chinadoll feels pretty weird. Not just fear, but the blankcheck certainty that she stands on the big brink. Her teeth chatter. Tongue tastes metallic. Head spins.

She slides down onto the floor. Looks around the rathole room, the dingy walls, the pissy mattress draped with a moth-eaten blanket. All her pain and confusion, and she never did anything wrong, not really, and this is how it ends. In a shitty hotel room.

The cube spits a ray of light.

The room bucks.

Across the wall appears this maw of darkness, like the light has turned inside out. The darkness curls with movement, filling with forms that aren't forms, waves of energy solidifying into masses, then receding into incorporeality again. Feedback crackles. The homey scent of burning wood fills her nose.

Her life flashes before her.

How she first met Flash. She was nipping Wild Turkey with Mug and some folks outside of the Jackson Street Safeway. Flash zoomed Front Street with a "Yee-Yee-Hee-Boom-Lacka-Lacka—Hah-Hah-Haaaah!"

Mug flipped. "That's Flash's yell for the bro," he said and waved their hero over.

Flash slapped hands all around, kissed the Wild Turkey. After conferring with Mug about matters of tribal importance, he checked out the new recruits.

"Rude hearwings," he said to Suki with lordly beneficence.

She was heavenized. On her left ear she wore a turquoise teardrop, steel moon, red plastic triangle, onyx dangle, yellow enameled hoop, ivory squiggle, and gold-filled, solar-powered Monet pinwheel. On her right ear she wore a ruby stud, jade cross, aluminum square, brass ball, ceramic T'ai C'hi, blue plastic daisy, and microcomputerized sterling silver skull with eyeballs that rolled and teeth that chomped.

"What do you do with the mates?" he asked. "I knew a lady who made mobiles with odd earrings."

"Got no mates," Suki said. "Just one of each."

He smiled a devil's smile, encouraging.

"I—*find* things." She stared down at her handlebars, shamed. Did he too think her a thief? A drugstore counter shoplifter? A pickpocket, and

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a bumbling one at that? A petty pilferer, wandering through Macy's on her days off?

"Yeah?" Flash said. "Crazy, Chinadoll. Come closer. Take a look at this."

He turned away from the others so no one else could see. Pulled open his threadbare lumberjack shirt and hoisted out the top seam of his T-shirt.

Pinned to the yellowed cotton was a solid gold brooch in the shape of a bumblebee, set with rubies and sapphires and diamonds. It was ridiculous and obscene and absolutely gorgeous.

"This fence I know appraised it at two and a half K. Chinadoll," Flash said, and winked at her. "I *find* things."

"A witch in Berkeley researched it for me," Flash explained when he met Suki later in Golden Gate Park. He brought a backpack with him and pulled from it a crumbling book.

Encyclopedia of Occultism, he showed her, and the 1898 copyright. Sure enough, there with *onomancy* and *orthinomancy,*—each respectively dealing, Flash said, with divination from people's names and the cries of birds—was *oniomancy.*

"*Onio* is Latin for price or cost," Flash said. "*Oniomania,* for example, means the pathological obsession to possess precious things. Mommy dearest of mine has got it bad.

"So an *oniomancer* is a citizen with the power of finding precious objects. Sometimes, in the old times, there was an initiation. Witches would take an orphan or an idiot, and rub excrement on the unfortunate's fingers, and generally humiliate the poor bastard, and say an incantation. And then the initiate would come to possess the power to find money and valuable things."

Flash gave the Chinadoll his zen grin and looked at her as though he could spot symptoms of her initiation on her back jeans pocket.

"Morgana, my witch friend in Berkeley, thinks oniomancy is either a form of psychokinesis or a variation of water divination. *I* think it's a specialized, intensified aspect of the electromagnetic field normally emitted by the body. The oniomancer is the negative pole; the precious object, the positive pole. Through electromagnetic attraction, one is drawn to the other. That's why the ancient ritual required an outcast, a worthless person, you see. And shaming, anointment with shit. The witches were attempting to invoke and enhance the negative magnetic force that the oniomancer possesses. No offense, Chinadoll."

She wasn't sure if she should be offended or not.

"So maybe an oniomancer does have psychokinetic power to move things," Flash said, musing. "Can't prove it by me, though. Morgana

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asked me to bring back lost things for members of her coven. Valuable things, things of sentimental importance. But I just couldn't find things when I *tried* to."

"I find things when I least expect to," Suki agreed.

"That's why you've got to approach finding with a certain consciousness," Flash said. "You can't try. You can't be *attached.*"

"What do you mean, 'attached'?"

"I mean you can't dream of wealth. You can't desire valuable things. You can't be obsessed with materialism like everyone else these days. Then the things come."

"Oh, man. What kind of crap is that?" Suki said, and she hadn't cared that it was Flash. "You're no outcast. You're no orphan or idiot. You're white, you're male, you're smart, and you're not bad looking underneath all that hair. You dropped out because you *wanted* to. True?"

"Shit, Chinadoll," said Flash. "Mommy dearest always dreamed I'd be a CPA. But I'm no good at math."

"Yeah," she said. "I bet you went to college. I bet you could clean up and put on a suit and get a good boring job any time you wanted to. I bet you could even go back to mommy dearest if things get really bad for you. Don't *you* tell *me* I can't desire!"

"Take it easy, Chinadoll," said Flash, not mad.

"I've got nothing *but* my desire," she said. "I was born bug. Born bust. Born gash. My mama kicked me out. My high school kicked me out. *Society* has kicked me out. My life is worth *zip,* and I'm sick of it! I want the world, and I want it NOW."

Flash looked at Suki for a long time, with such sorrow behind his granny glasses that she had to look away.

"It's your life, and you can do what you want," he said at last. "But Chinadoll. Just listen. When you desire nothing, the universe is yours."

In a crazy way, Flash was right, of course. Despite Suki's objections to his theory, she knew just what he meant. Finding *was* not desiring. Not being *attached.*

As though Flash's revelation had wrapped wire around her magnets and turned on the switch, she began scooping solid all the time. A rain-soaked wad of Andy Jacksons. Porsche sunglasses with a leather case. A plastic bag from City Lights Bookstore containing the Longmeadow Press Complete Works of H.G. Wells, the two-volume set of the Oxford English Dictionary, and the latest issue of *Rolling Stone.* A styrofoam carryout carton from La Fuente stuffed with an untouched crab enchilada. Hey, she was rich.

And she might have zoomed on, no complaints, if she hadn't Found Major.

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She was cruising Van Ness Avenue, past the Opera Center, with a stack of lithographs bound for the Vorpal Gallery. There must have been an opening matinee, with snazzy chrome and la-di-das everywhere. She was gawking at the scene, doing a slow burn, when she saw the glitter.

Heaped in the trash-strewn gutter like a Seven-Up bottle all smashed up. Limousine wheels whooshing right by it, near misses.

She scooped.

It wasn't glass. It was a necklace, a long, dangly gold-looking thing, with a broken safety chain and about a hundred faceted sparkly green stones the size of her fingernail set in flower designs, strung petal to petal. The clasp was squashed flat. She bit it, splicing the runner ring onto the first link of the opposite end.

And she slung that sucker on.

It lay on her T-shirted breast like devil's candy, an optical illusion.

The receptionist at the Vorpal Gallery hassled her, as usual, but the receptionist didn't seem to *see* that spectacular necklace, even when she looked right at Suki. All she saw was the Chinadoll. A scruffy bike messenger.

Suki sped back to Speedster & Company. Flash flashed right away. But instead of whooping it up with her, he took her aside.

"Stash that, Chinadoll. *Now*," he commanded, with a look worthy of Mama.

"Aw, Flash," she said, giggling. "I want to show the world. It's the coolest, rudest thing I ever . . ."

"*Listen* to me. We've got to get you to a fence."

"But I don't want to go to a fence. Why should I? It's mine now."

"Because that thing could be worth . . . I don't know *what* it could be worth, Chinadoll. More than you've ever dreamed of in your whole life. And the fence will give you a good percentage of that. And *that* will set you up for a long, long time. Chinadoll. Do you *hear* me?" Flash had never looked so worried.

"So how come you haven't fenced the bee?" she demanded.

"Oh, hell," he said. "With extra cash in my pocket, I'd buy some junker, or bet it all on the wrong horse, or go to Africa, just to do it. Catch some crazy dream, if only for a little while. And then I'd be broke again, and the bee would be gone. This is different, Chinadoll."

"All right," she said. "I'll fence the damn thing. Next week, maybe."

"Tomorrow, definitely. Now stash that. You could get into trouble."

But she didn't stash it.

After work, the Chinadoll put on the necklace and a really tight, green velvet dress that she'd bought at the Alameda flea market, and she went dancing. She had a ball, with who knew how much trouble bouncing about her neck. She even considered going down to Chinatown, she was

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that drunk, but she chickened out and cried a while instead. Then some guy bought her another gin and tonic, and she laughed and danced some more.

Flash later said he tried all night to call her at the Tower Hotel. This was surely true. She had a hazy snippet of memory of the transvestite on the third floor barricaded in the Tower's phone booth, looking like someone had run off with his hormones *and* his makeup. She had a hazier memory of almost falling face flat in front of Bulldog's boots, and he didn't even take a kick at her. She remembered thinking, this must be my lucky day, before she swan-dived into bed.

Fat chance. When Suki debuted at Speedster & Company the next morning, the black-and-white paddywagon was waiting. The cops nabbed her. Flash was babbling, "I heard it on the eleven o'clock news, Chinadoll, some rich lady offered a reward for information, somebody must have seen you with the necklace, somebody tipped them . . ."

At the cop shop, everyone got dragon and talked at her too fast in English. Mama and Papa were called, but no one showed up to post her bail.

They threw her in jail.

After a while this old Chinese suit came in, hauling a cheap vinyl briefcase. Slant eyes folded up in a face like a yellow prune, he ah-so'd and stoked Camels as he squinted over her checkered past.

"Miss Fong," pruneface said finally, looking up from her file. "I am your court-appointed attorney. I see here you're eighteen, high school drop-out, reports of cheating, shoplifting, ah-ha. Your parents said on the phone you've had problems since you were a little girl. They said they don't have custody of you anymore. So you're on your own. Ever had counseling?"

"Those pinheads don't know nothing. I never stole nothing."

"Ah-ha. We're talking grand theft now, Miss Fong," said pruneface. "Would you like to tell me what you were doing with Mrs. Crocker's antique Cartier emerald necklace?"

"That old thing? I scooped it. On Van Ness Avenue."

"Scooped?"

"I found the fucker. Or maybe the truth is the fucker found me."

"Found it, ah-ha," said pruneface, pausing, perusing the case file with a puzzled look. "All right, let's say you *did* find it. Why didn't you turn it over to the authorities, right away? Why didn't you go for the reward? Something valuable like that? Something you don't own?"

"Come on, suit," she said. "Don't you get it? I *found* that necklace, fair and square. It's *mine* now."

"Yours now." Pruneface studied her. "Here," he said suddenly. "Would

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you hold this a minute for me?" From his jacket pocket he retrieved a pen. "*Hold* this, understand?"

Suki took it. A gold-filled Mont Blanc ballpoint. Nice.

"Really rude," she said and tucked the pen into her T-shirt pocket.

"Now give it back," he said.

"Blow, suit. *I* got it now."

"No!" pruneface yelled. "It's *mine!*" He snatched the pen.

"Mine! Mine!" She clawed at him and snatched it back.

He slapped her hands. "Guard!"

A cop came in and pinned her back into the chair.

"Listen up, punk," pruneface said coldly.

Suki stuck her tongue out at him.

"We live in a society based on private property," he said. "Do you know what that means? That means that people who own property hold *title*. Do you know what title is?"

"Sure I do," she said right away. "Like 'Jumpin' Jack Flash,' or '1999,' or 'Rebel Yell,' or 'Groove the Moon' . . ."

Pruneface's mouth dropped. "*Title,*" he said painfully, "is an owner's claim of right to property. That claim of right exists regardless of whether the owner has actual possession of the property. That claim of right exists no matter *where* the property *is*. That claim of right, I would even venture to say, is more valuable than the thing itself! Which means," said pruneface, puffing up. "That you can't just *take* what you want. You don't own something just because you hold it in your grimy little hands. And you *can't just keep what you find.*"

Suki was astounded. She had never heard of such a thing, this invisible thing, more valuable than what the eye could see. Pruneface's words hit her like a car door flipping open on the bike lane. The Mont Blanc dropped out of her grasp, sucked away by this invisible force called *title* more resolutely than by gravity.

"Oh." She thought of all the titles she must have truly stolen. They wailed at her like a hellful of ghosts. "Oh *wow.*"

"Ah-ha." Pruneface nodded, beaming. "Maybe now you understand. What you did was *wrong,* Miss Fong. Oh, maybe not an invasive offense, maybe not a true crime, but part and parcel of a pervasive demoralization, a moral turpitude on the part of kids like you, Miss Fong, this disrespect for the institution of private property. A termite gnawing at the house of civilization, *that's* what you are, Miss Fong. No, you don't have a technical offense, but no one here believes you, and I'm glad. I want you to have some time to think it over, Miss Fong. I can plea bargain you down to petty theft. No problem, I know Judge Brown. But I won't let you off scot-free. I don't want you to forget this. And I don't ever want

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to see you in here again. Understand? And wash that *pink* crap out of your hair."

Suki got ninety days for petty theft and a stern warning from Judge Brown.

She liked jail. It was quiet, and the food was great compared to the junk she'd been chowing down, and she didn't have to live next door to a creepola moron like Bulldog. Some chicanas tried to beat her up the first night she was there, but word got around she was a master finger, and the black girls protected her.

She found lots of things in jail: capsules, joints, tabs, pints, microcassette VCR's, knives, jimmies, dirty holograms, three sets of lace lingerie, and one gun that was so small she couldn't believe it was real until the tiny bullet she shot popped a hole through her metal dinner plate.

She gave everything to the black girls. It was the black girls who found out through the grapevine that Bulldog had turned her in for Mrs. Crocker's diddly reward.

Time passed. Suki lost track of the outside. So it took her by surprise, when she got her walking papers, that the latest rage in San Francisco was to paint your face blue and that aliens from another planet had landed in the middle of the Crissy Fields baseball diamond.

The Axiomers were as tall and as elegant as King Tut tomb paintings. Their planet had enjoyed high technology for centuries. They were a pragmatic race, concerned with efficiency, conservation, prudence, and toil. A logical, rational, cool-tempered people, the Axiomers were willing to trade certain technologies for abstract art and surrealist videos. Rumor had it they never dreamed.

Mug took Suki back at Speedster & Company, but she was on probation. The manager at the Tower Hotel demanded back rent plus interest. Things were touch and go. She did her hair fuchsia again, but she declined the blue facepaint everyone else sported. Pruneface had sobered her outlook.

Axiomers have this gorgeous indigo skin. The Chinadoll knows. She saw them herself at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, the headline of the hour, preparing a demonstration of high technology for all those reporters.

The Chinadoll opens her eyes, wondering if she's dead yet.

The cube has quieted. The darkness disperses. Unless hell looks like the Tower Hotel, she isn't dead. Everything is silent, spooky.

The walls on the side where the black maw appeared are smoking, all burned up. It's like something neatly razored off the top inch of wormy wood with a hot knife.

The cube cools and darkens, purr-purring like a cat with fresh tuna.

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And where her funky old chilly excuse for a bed was is something she's never seen before.

Gleaming rods of burnished metal. Undulations of blush. A scented warmth like fireplaces and buttered toast and brandy.

With a yahoo, the Chinadoll leaps in.

She snuggles down, cuddles the cube.

"Testing, testing," the Chinadoll says. "What are you? Who are you? Speak to me. Can you speak to me?"

Purr-purr is all it says. How can she hold a grudge against something that says purr-purr and materializes, out of thin air, a big brass bed with silk bedcovers, electric wool blanket with Dial-Comfort Control, and satin sheets with giraffe pictures all over them?

The door to her room suddenly booms.

"Hey. Hey. You. Bug."

She is struck dumb.

"What the fuck you been doin' in there, bug?" says Bulldog through the door.

Clutching the cube, she still can't speak.

"You up shit creek now, bug," says Bulldog. He slams himself against the door.

The door jamb shatters. Like Conan the Barbarian's idiot brother, Bulldog barges into the room.

The Chinadoll leaps out of the brass bed, does her Tarzan imitation, hurls the Dial-Comfort Control at him. From her left fist where she's clutching it, the cube shoots a blue beam.

Black hole action all around the lousy bastard. If he's screaming, the audio has been turned as inside-out as the video.

Then a man crouches. He regains his feet drunkenly. She can see right away that he's a good two feet shorter than Bulldog, blond as a beachboy, and clad only in his birthday suit.

"Bulldog?" she says.

"Suki, my pearl, my jade," he says. He falls to her feet and begins kissing her boot toes.

"Bulldog, is—is that *you?*"

"It is I, oh precious one, and I am yours. But call me not by that foul name. I am really Harry, and I am at your beck and call. What would you have me do, esteemed mistress?"

"Harry?" She checks out his particulars. Suddenly she's starving. "Harry, go get me a cheeseburger with everything and an order of fries."

"It is done, mistress," he says, and darts out of her room.

Crazy, Chinadoll. She surveys this new realm of hers, the shitty hotel room with a big brass bed.

Before she can think twice, the cube spits a crackle of lightning.

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The halls of the Tower Hotel crumble before her into whorls of gray dust, then reconstitute. A silver-bricked bastion bristles with machiolations. Sturdy balustrades, soaring parapets, leap from the dust as she walks, beknighting all she sees with the cube's ray.

She steps out onto Grant Avenue. In the towaway zone is Bulldog's—Harry's—rattletrap van, windshield mardigras'ed with parking tickets, as usual. Just for a second, the Chinadoll considers that what was his is hers now, not as usual.

The cube goes cuckoo.

When the concrete stops heaving and the dust settles, she tiptoes through the rubble and inspects the fire-engine red Mercedes Benz 560 SLC. She takes out her childhood relic, the clover-topped solid silver key, jimmies the door lock open, jumps the starter.

She just never knew what she might find on the street.

She hot-rods Grant Avenue, blasts the radio. The news comes on. Before she can get bored, the newscaster relates the latest crisis.

At the demonstration of high technology at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, the Axiomers had somehow lost a device. They called this device a Qualitative Molecular Transmutator. The device, activated by imaging, altered the molecular structure of a target, transmuting one mass into an identical—but qualitatively different—mass.

The device changed worthless things into things of value.

Chinadoll, she tells herself. Her cube? *Her* cube!

The Axiomers had blown their cool. They explained how severe disruption of the space-time continuum could occur if the device had fallen into untrained hands. The effect could be catastrophic.

San Francisco was in panic. The National Guard was called out. The Mayor of San Francisco categorically denied government agents were involved. Diplomatic relations became strained. Martial law had been declared. The Governor of California agreed with the Axiomers that getting the device back was critical. The California Lottery offered an extravagant reward.

Reward? Who needs some piddling reward? Through her pain and her humiliation and her loneliness, she, the Chinadoll, oniomancer supreme, has found the most valuable thing in the whole world. A thing that can transmute anything she sees into something of value. And if the cube can transmute *anything,* then the world, yes, *the whole world,* is hers. Everything, *any*thing. Anything she can see.

But Chinadoll, she tells herself. You can't always get what you want.

What about the invisible things? Things she's dreamed about in the dark of night, things lost forever in a regretted past?

She'd love to hear Mama call her darling child. Feel Papa gently stroke

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her cheek. Have May comb her waist-length black hair. See Kim iron her dresses. Tell Ben to shine her Tower floors. Make Jimmy lick her boot toes.

She strokes the cube, heads for Chinatown.

The U.S. Congress implored whoever had the Axiomer device to think of his or her loyalty to the planet earth. Terran respect and honor in interplanetary relations. The Axiomers hinted at possible reprisals. The President appealed to the thief's sense of responsibility. To that person's duty under the law to return Axiomer property to its *rightful owners*.

This last plea gives the Chinadoll pause.

From afar the *rightful owners* slap at her last shred of conscience. After all, the right to *own* the cube, pruneface once said, is more valuable than even the cube itself. And she doesn't have that right, just because she has the *cube*. The invisible, inexorable pull of private property rights tugs at her cube.

Thief thief thief! A termite gnawing at the house of civilization. That was how old pruneface insulted her.

Insulted her. *Wronged* her.

And what about this planet Axiom? Was civilization *there* based on the institution of private property rights? And just which law applies to her cube, the law of Axiom or the law of Earth?

To *her* cube.

The cube hums, not a machine hum, but a soft, rolling purr-purr. Little hungry cats. How the Chinadoll loves you.

Would Flash mind having hair of gold and indigo skin and a face like young Toshiro Mifune? Could he love her one day?

Hey. Chomp, chomp.

Finders, keepers. ●

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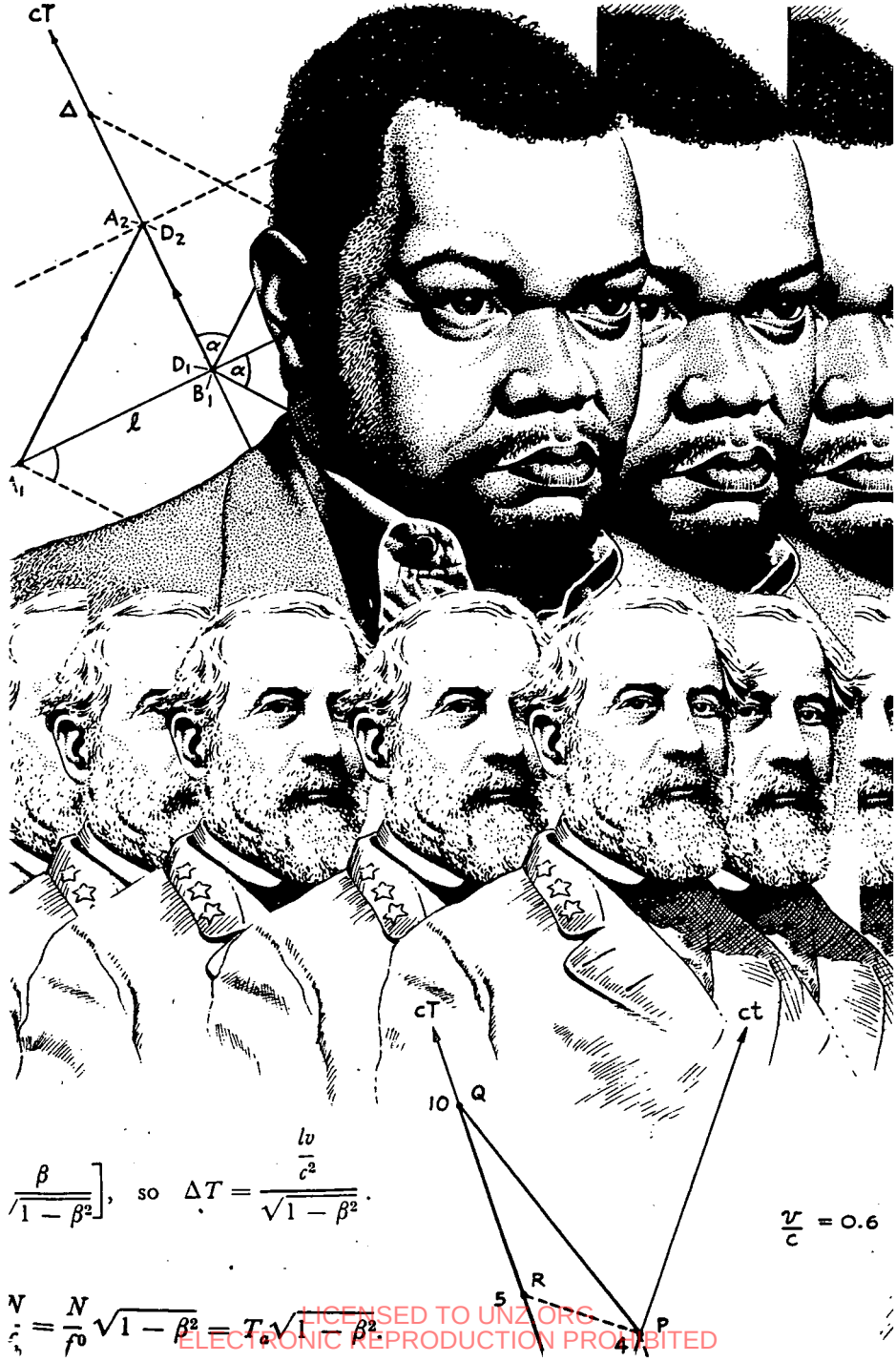

$\frac{\beta}{\sqrt{1-\beta^2}}\Big]$, so $\Delta T = \frac{\frac{lv}{c^2}}{\sqrt{1-\beta^2}}$.

$\frac{v}{c} = 0.6$

$\frac{N}{\nu} = \frac{N}{\nu_0}\sqrt{1-\beta^2} = T_0\sqrt{1-\beta^2}$

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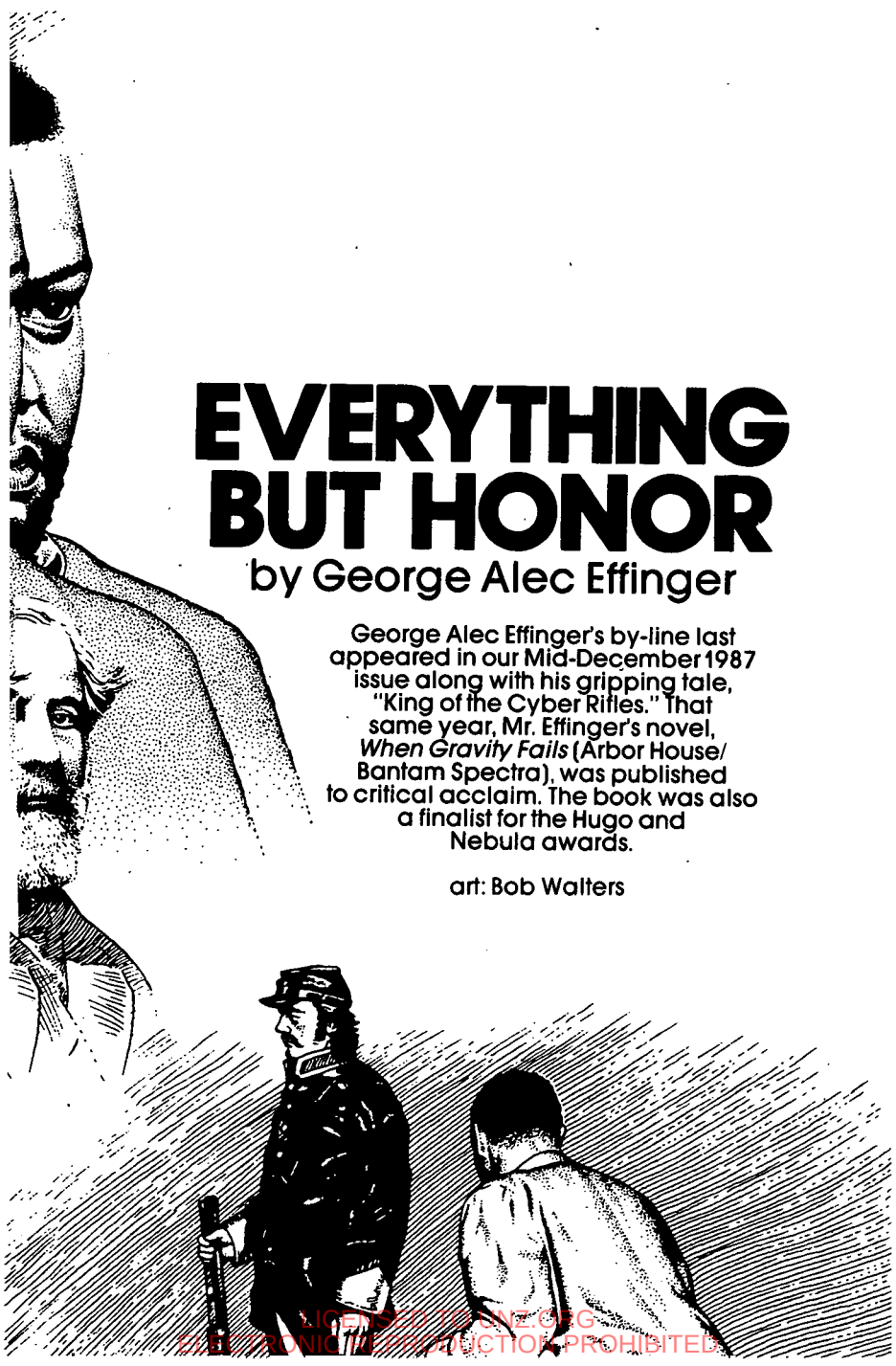

EVERYTHING BUT HONOR

by George Alec Effinger

George Alec Effinger's by-line last appeared in our Mid-December 1987 issue along with his gripping tale, "King of the Cyber Rifles." That same year, Mr. Effinger's novel, *When Gravity Fails* (Arbor House/ Bantam Spectra), was published to critical acclaim. The book was also a finalist for the Hugo and Nebula awards.

art: Bob Walters

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Dr. Thomas Placide, a black American-born physicist, decided to murder Brigadier General David E. Twiggs, and he realized that it had to be done in December of 1860. He made this decision at the Berlin Olympics of 1936. Jesse Owens had just triumphed over the world's best runners in the two hundred-meter dash. The physicist jumped up and cheered for the American victory, while his companion applauded politely. Yaakov Fein was one of the most influential scientists in the German Empire, but he was no chauvinist. After the race, Owens was presented to Prince Friedrich. The papers later reported that the prince had apologized for the absence of the seventy-seven-year-old Kaiser, and Owens had replied, "I'm sure the most powerful man in the world has more important things to do than watch six young men in their underwear run halfway around a circle." The quotation may have been the product of some journalist's imagination, but it became so identified with Jesse Owens that there was no point in arguing about it.

Whatever the truth of the matter, Placide settled back in his seat and looked at his program, getting himself ready for the next event. "You must be proud of him," said Fein. "A fellow Negro."

"I *am* proud of him," his friend said. "A fellow American."

"But you are a naturalized German citizen now, Thomas. You should cheer for the German runners."

Placide only shrugged.

Fein went on. "It's a hopeful sign that a Negro has finally won a place on the American Olympic team."

Placide showed some annoyance. "In America, Negroes have equal rights these days."

"Separate, but equal," said Fein.

The black man turned to him. "They aren't slaves anymore, if that's what you're implying. The German Empire has this fatuous paternal concern for all the downtrodden people in the world. Maybe you haven't noticed it, but the rest of the world is getting pretty damn tired of your meddling."

"We believe in using our influence for everyone's benefit."

That seemed to irritate Placide even more. "Every time some Klan bigot burns a cross in Mississippi, you Germans—"

Fein smiled. "*We* Germans, you mean," he said.

Placide frowned. "All right, we Germans send over a goddamn 'peacekeeping force' for the next nine months."

Fein patted the air between them. "Calm down, Thomas," he said, "you're being far too sensitive."

"Let's just watch the track and field events, and forget the social criticism."

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"All right with me," said Fein. They dropped the subject for the moment, but Placide was sure that it would come up again soon.

Two years later, in November, 1938, Dr. Placide was selected to make the first full-scale operational test of the Cage. He liked to think it was because of his contribution to the project. His journey through time would be through the courtesy of the Placide-Born-Dirac Effect, and neither Max Born nor Paul Dirac expressed any enthusiasm for the chance to act as guinea pig. In Berlin and Göttingen, there was a great deal of argument over just what the Placide-Born-Dirac Effect was, and the more conservative theorists wanted to limit the experiments to making beer steins and rodents disappear, which Placide and Fein had been doing for over a year.

"My point," said Placide at a conference of leading physicists in Göttingen, "is that after all this successful study, it's time for someone to hop in the Cage and find out what's happening, once and for all."

"I think it's certainly time to take the next step," said Heisenberg.

"I agree," said Schrödinger.

Dirac rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Nevertheless," he said, "it's much too soon to talk about human subjects."

"Are you seriously suggesting we risk a human life on the basis of our ill-fitted and unproven theories?" asked Einstein.

Marquand shrugged. "It would be a chance to clear up all the foggy rhetoric about paradoxes," he said.

La Martine just stood to one side, sullenly shaking his head. He obviously thought that Placide's suggestion was unsound, if not altogether insane.

"We have four in favor of using a human subject in the Cage, and four against," said Yaakov Fein. He took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "I'm the project director, and I suppose it's my responsibility to settle this matter. God help me if I choose wrong. I say we go ahead and expand the scope of the experiment."

Placide looked relieved. "Let me volunteer, then," he said.

"Typical American recklessness," said La Martine in a sour voice.

"You mean," said Placide, "that you'll be happy if I'm the one in the Cage. Not as a reward for my work, of course, but because if anybody's alternate history is going to be screwed up, better it be America's than Germany's."

La Martine just spread his hands and said nothing.

"Then I volunteer to go along," said Fein. "As co-pilot."

"There's nothing for a 'co-pilot' to do," said Placide. Even then, it may have been that Fein didn't have complete faith in Placide's motives.

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Placide had his own agenda, after all, but he kept it secret from the others.

"Why don't you travel back a week or so," suggested Born. "Then you can take a photograph or find some other proof to validate the experiment, and return immediately to Göttingen and time T_0."

"In for a penny, in for a pound," said Placide. "I'd like to choose my own destination, and possibly solve a little historical problem while I have the chance." The Cage would never have existed without him, and so it didn't take him long to persuade the others. Placide and Fein worked with Marquand and his team for nine more weeks, learning to calibrate the Cage. In the meantime, Placide studied everything he could find about General Twiggs, and he carefully hid his true plan from the Europeans.

Placide should have known that his first attempt would not go smoothly, because as far as he could see, his plan was foolproof. His reasoning was simple: His primary goal—greater even than testing the operation of the Cage—was to relieve the barbaric conditions forced on American blacks following the Confederate Insurrection of 1861-1862.

Although he'd quit the land of his birth, he still felt an unbreakable bond between himself and others of his race, who could never escape the oppression as he had. A white friend of his father had enabled Placide to attend Yale University, where he'd studied math and physics. During the middle 1930s, after he joined the great community of experimental scientists working in the German Empire, he began to see how he might accomplish something far more important than adding a new quibble to the study of particle physics.

The Cage—*his* Cage, as he sometimes thought of it—gave him the opportunity to make a vital contribution. His unhappy experiences as a child and a young man in the United States supplied him with sufficient motive. All he lacked was the means, and this he found through historical research as painstaking as his scientific work with Dirac and Born.

To Placide, Brigadier General David Emanuel Twiggs seemed to be one of those anonymous yet crucial players in the long game of history. In 1860 he was the military commander of the Department of Texas. Although few students of the Confederate Insurrection would even recognize his name, Twiggs nevertheless had a moment, the briefest moment, when he determined the course of future events. Placide had come to realize that Twiggs was his target. Twiggs could be used to liberate American blacks from all the racist hardships and injustices of the twentieth century.

Leaving T_0, the Cage brought Placide and Yaakov Fein to San Antonio on December 24, 1860. Fein agreed to guard the Cage, which had come

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to rest in a wintry field about three miles from Twiggs' headquarters. Fein, of course, had no idea that Placide had anything in mind other than a quick scouting trip into this city of the past.

Placide began walking. From nearby he could hear the lowing of cattle, gathered now in shadowed groups beneath the arching limbs of live oaks. He climbed down a hill into a shallow valley of moonlit junipers and red cedar. The air smelled clean and sharp, although this Christmas Eve in Texas was not as cold as the February he'd left behind in Germany. Frosty grass crunched underfoot; as he passed through the weeds, their rough seeds clung to his trouser legs.

His exhilaration at his safe arrival in another time was tempered almost immediately by anxiety over the danger he was in. If anyone stopped and questioned him, he would have an impossible time explaining himself. At best, he would be taken for a freed slave, and as such he could expect little if any help from the local citizens. Worse was the fact that he had no proper identification and no money, and thus he would certainly appear to be a runaway.

Placide had put himself in a grave and desperate situation. If he failed and was captured, his only hope would be Fein, but Fein was a German with little knowledge of this period in American history. Placide did not have much faith in the other man's ability to rescue him, if it came to that. It might happen that no one would ever learn of Placide's sacrifice. He was thinking of the black generations yet unborn, and not his colleagues in Göttingen: There were plenty of others who could take Placide's place in the scientific field, but he was in a unique position to do something remarkable for his oppressed people.

As it happened, Placide was not detained or captured. He made his way through the barren, cold night to the general's quarters. Twiggs was already in bed, and there was a young soldier standing sentry duty outside the door. Placide shook his head ruefully. Here was the first serious hitch in his plans. He was going to have to do something about that guard.

It wasn't so difficult to gain entry. Placide needed only to nod at the young man, grab him, and drive a knife into his chest. The soldier made a soft, gurgling cry and slumped heavily in Placide's grasp. Placide let the body fall silently to the floor. He paused a moment, listening for any sign of alarm, but all was still. Oddly, he felt no sense of guilt for what he'd done. In a way, the world of 1860 didn't seem truly real to him. It was as if the man he'd killed had never really existed, although the corporal's dark blood had stained Placide's trousers convincingly.

Placide went quietly through the door and stood over General Twiggs' bed, looking down at him. He was old, seventy or so, with long white hair and a dense white beard. He looked like a Biblical patriarch, sleeping

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peacefully. Placide was surprised to discover that it was not in him simply to kill the old man in his sleep. Placide wasn't sure if he was too cruel or too weak for that. He woke Twiggs, pressing one hand over the general's mouth to keep him silent.

"Don't make a sound," Placide said as Twiggs struggled to sit up. "I must speak with you. I'll remove my hand if you promise not to call out for help. That will do you no good in any event." Twiggs nodded slowly, his eyes wide.

Placide took his hand away. Twiggs gasped and tried to speak, but for a moment he could only wheeze. "Who are you?" he asked at last.

"That's not important. You must understand that your life is in my hands. Will you answer my questions?"

Twiggs was no fool. He knew better than to bluster or threaten. He nodded again. Dressed in his bedclothes, he was a wrinkled, feeble figure; but Placide suppressed his pity for the old man. Twiggs was a Southerner by birth and a secessionist by inclination. "You are in command here," Placide said.

"Yes," said the general. "If you think that after breaking into my room, you can get me to arrange for you to escape—"

Placide raised a hand curtly, cutting him off. "If for some reason you stepped down, who would assume command in your place?"

Twiggs' brow furrowed, but otherwise he showed no outward sign of fear. "I suppose it would be Lieutenant Colonel Lee," he said.

"You mean Robert E. Lee?"

"Of the First Cavalry," said Twiggs.

Placide was relieved to hear the answer. Some months before, while Twiggs had been away from San Antonio, he had named Lee acting commander of the Department of Texas. If Twiggs were forced to retire, Lee would take over again until the War Department made its own permanent appointment.

"Now let me propose a hypothetical situation," said Placide. "Suppose Texas decides to secede from the Union—"

"So you've burst your way in here and ruined my sleep to argue politics?" Twiggs demanded angrily. "And what have you done to the young man on guard duty?"

Placide slapped Twiggs hard across the face. "Suppose Texas decides to secede from the Union," he repeated calmly. "What would your position be?"

The general raised a trembling hand to his cheek. His expression was furious, and Placide caught the first hint of fear in his eyes. "Texas will secede," Twiggs said softly. "Any fool can read that. I've already written to Washington, but the War Department has so far chosen not to send me any definite instructions."

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"What will you do when the rebels demand your surrender?"

Twiggs' gaze left Placide's face and stared blankly toward the far wall. "I will surrender," he said finally. "I have not the means to carry on a civil war in Texas."

A gunshot would have roused the entire garrison. Placide cut the old man's throat with his knife, then searched the room for items to take back with him to show Fein and the others. Finally, he made his escape back into the silent night of the past. Outside, it was very strange to smell bread baking not far away, as if all was well, as if something impossible had not just happened.

"There," he told himself, "you have changed history." It remained to be seen if he'd changed it for the better.

When Placide met Fein later that night, he suggested that they not return directly to 1938 and Göttingen. Fein was dubious. "The more time we spend here," he argued, "the more chance there is that someone will see us. We may cause an alteration in the flow of events. That could be disastrous."

Placide swallowed a mouthful of brandy he'd taken from Twiggs' headquarters building. The liquor had a harsh, sweet taste, but it gave the illusion of warmth. He offered the brandy to his companion. "Yaakov," he said, shivering in the cold night wind, "it's already too late."

Fein's brows narrowed. "What are you talking about?" He declined to sample the general's brandy.

Placide shrugged. "Just that I've already inserted myself into the past. I had a conversation with General Twiggs."

"Don't you know what that means?" cried Fein. He was furious. "We may return to the present and find God only knows what!"

"I couldn't help it," said Placide. "I was discovered. I was arrested and taken to the commanding officer. I had to do some fancy talking or you would never have seen me again."

"God help us," murmured Fein. The two men looked at each other for a moment. There was no sound but the lonely creaking of bare tree limbs, and the rustle of dead leaves blowing along the ground.

"Look," said Placide, "why don't we jump ahead to, say, February, and find out if anything's different. In case of some kind of disaster, we can always reappear a few minutes before T_0 and prevent ourselves from making this trip."

"I don't know," said the German. "That might leave two of you and two of me in the present."

"Let's worry about that only if we have to. Right now we've got to find out if my little interview had any permanent effect." Fein watched him closely, but said nothing more.

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The two men entered the Cage, and Placide reset the controls to take them forward a few weeks. He knew that on February 16, 1861, Texas state troops would surround the government buildings in San Antonio. Twiggs would give in quickly to demands that he turn over all the arms and equipment to the militia. Of course, he had prevented that from happening with his single bold stroke. In effect, he'd put Robert E. Lee in command of the Department of Texas. Lee was a Virginian, but he had publicly stated that he would have no part in a revolution against the Union. Placide had acted to change his mind.

They reappeared in San Antonio on the twentieth of February. Once more, Fein guarded the Cage while Placide went into town. The air was warmer, and smelled of wood smoke. He heard the ragged cries of birds, and once he saw a large black winged shape detach itself from the ground and fly into a cottonwood that was beginning to show new yellow-green leaves. For a while, everything seemed peaceful.

The town, however, was in a frenzied state of confusion. Bands of armed rebels patrolled the streets. Gunshots frequently split the air. The younger men wore the wide-eyed, fierce looks of inexperienced warriors looking forward to their first battle. The older men and women were grim and worried, obviously in fear that the conflict that had threatened so long in the abstract had come at last.

Placide stood in a narrow alley between two shops, afraid to push himself into the throngs of shouting people in the street. Finally, as both his curiosity and fear for his own safety increased, he stopped a well-dressed, elderly white man. "Pardon me, sir," he said, trying to sound calm, "my master has sent me for news."

The older man drew himself up, unhappy at being accosted in the street by an unfamiliar slave. "Tell your master that our boys have driven the Federals out," he said.

"That news will ease his pain," said Placide. He was galled to have to pretend to be a slave, but he had no other choice. "And Lee?"

"The rascal is dead, killed in the fight." The man was so pleased to be able to report that fact, he actually slapped the black man's shoulder.

Placide was stunned by the news; he'd hoped to persuade Lee to become a general for the South. He watched the man turn and go on about his business, and he knew that it was time to go about his own. His plan had not failed; it had but succeeded too well.

When they returned to T_0, Placide and Fein discovered that the present was just as they'd left it, that their excursion in time had not changed the past, but rather created a new alternate reality. Still, some of their colleagues were furious.

"What the hell were you thinking of?" demanded Eduard La Martine.

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He'd been fascinated by the theoretical aspects of their work, but fearful of practical applications.

Now Yaakov Fein was convinced that the Cage was too dangerous to use, at least until the Placide-Born-Dirac Effect was better understood.

Placide knew that if he hoped to try again in the past, he'd have to win La Martine and Fein over. "Look," he said, "we're all curious about what happens when a change is made in the past."

"You were tampering!" cried La Martine. "As it turned out, you had no permanent effect—"

"So I don't understand why you're so upset."

"—but there was the possibility that you might have changed this world disastrously, for all of us. You had no right to attempt such a thing!"

"Sending beer steins into the past might have had disastrous results, too, Eduard," said Werner Heisenberg thoughtfully. "Yet you had no qualms about that."

"Making inanimate objects vanish is hardly equal to interviewing historical figures in their bedrooms," said Paul Dirac indignantly.

Placide had told the others that he'd merely discussed politics with General Twiggs. It hadn't seemed profitable at the time to mention that he'd killed the old man. "You know how I feel about the Legislated Equality programs in the United States."

Dirac gave him a weary look and nodded.

"Before returning here to T_0, Yaakov and I jumped from 1861 to 1895, where we bought a history of that new timeline." Placide held up the book. "Here are the effects of our visit. I thought by going back before the Confederate Insurrection and starting things off on a different course, I could keep the Equality programs and the Liberty Boroughs and all the other abuses from ever happening. I persuaded Twiggs to retire, because I knew Robert E. Lee wouldn't surrender the garrison at San Antonio. His sense of duty and honor wouldn't allow it. He'd resist, and there would be a violent confrontation. The war would begin there in Texas, rather than two months later at Fort Sumter."

"So?" asked Heisenberg.

"So Lee would learn firsthand that the war could not be avoided, and that the needs of the Confederacy were immediate and desperate. I was certain that history would unfold differently from there on. I wanted Lee to turn down Lincoln's invitation to command the Union Army. In our world, his military brilliance brought the rebellion under control in little more than eighteen months. Now, though, we'd created a new timeline, one in which Lee would not be the Great Traitor, but rather the great genius of the Southern cause."

"But you were wrong, Thomas," said Fein. "Without Lee to lead it, the

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Union *still* defeated the Confederacy. All you succeeded in doing was extending the bloody conflict another year while the North searched for able military leadership."

Placide shrugged. "A minor miscalculation," he said.

"You're personally responsible for the death of Robert E. Lee, man!" said La Martine.

Placide was startled. "What do you mean? Robert E. Lee's been dead for almost seventy years. He died peacefully in the White House, not yet halfway through his term as President."

"Yes," said Zach Marquand, "in *our* timeline that's what happened. But you went into another universe and interfered. Lee's blood is on your hands."

Placide suddenly saw the absurd point Marquand was trying to make. "Zach," he said, "we went into a world that doesn't exist. It was a fantasy world. That Robert E. Lee didn't really live, and he didn't really die. He was no more than a possibility, a quantum quirk."

"We're talking about people, Thomas," said Erwin Schrödinger, "not particles."

"Particles come into and go out of existence all the time. Just the same way, the people and events in that timeline were only local expressions of the wave function. You're letting emotion twist your thinking."

Fein frowned at him. "Thomas, I want you to prepare a report as quickly as you can. We're all going to have to think very hard about this. You've shown us that there are moral questions involved with this project that none of us foresaw."

"Yaakov, I wish you'd—"

"And I'm not going to permit anyone to use the Cage again until we establish some philosophical ground rules." Fein gave Placide a long, appraising look, then turned and left the room. Placide glanced at the book they'd brought back, the history of America in the timeline they now called Universe$_2$. He was very eager to get back to his quarters and read of the elaborate and unpredictable results of what he'd done.

Placide made another trip into the past, this one unauthorized and in secret. He didn't know what Yaakov Fein would do if he found out that Placide had ignored his prohibition, but to be truthful, Placide didn't care. He had more important matters to worry about. It was his belief—and both Schrödinger and Marquand agreed with him—that a second experiment would take him to an 1861 untouched by his previous meddling. If their many-worlds hypothesis had any validity, it was statistically unlikely that Placide would find himself back in Universe$_2$. He could make a clean start in Universe$_3$, profiting from his regrettable mistakes.

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His destination this second time was the District of Columbia, on the morning of April 18, 1861. He was dressed in clothes that would attract little attention in the past, and he took with him a small sum of U.S. money in gold and silver that he'd purchased through numismatic shops in Berlin. Upon his arrival, Placide left the Cage outside of town, as he'd done in Texas. He walked some distance in the chilly air of early spring. He intended to find a hotel where he might hire a carriage, but this was more difficult than he'd imagined. He was, after all, a black man and a stranger, on some inscrutable errand of his own. Whenever he approached an innkeeper or carriage-driver with his gold coins, he was told either that none of the vehicles were in proper repair, or that they had all been reserved to other parties. He understood their meaning well enough.

Placide made his way along Pennsylvania Avenue to Blair House, almost directly across the street from the Executive Mansion. He gave a little involuntary shiver when he realized that inside the White House, at that moment, Abraham Lincoln was hearing firsthand reports of the events at Fort Sumter, and preparing his order to blockade the Confederate ports. Placide was tempted to abandon his subtle plan and instead seek an interview with the President himself. What advice and warnings he could give Lincoln, if he would only listen . . .

That was the problem, of course: Getting these strong-willed men to pay attention. Placide knew that he could help them save thousands of lives, and at the same time build a future free of the oppression their shortsightedness would lead to. His influence, of course, would be greater if he were white, but there was no point in making idle wishes. He would do the best he could.

A carriage pulled up in front of Blair House just as he arrived. He knew that the man who stepped down from it must be Robert E. Lee, although he didn't look much like the photographs Placide was familiar with. Lee was wearing the blue uniform of the United States Army, and he carried the wide-brimmed hat of a cavalry officer in one hand. He had yet to grow his famous gray beard. He was taller, too, with broad shoulders and a strict posture and military bearing that gave him an imposing appearance. His manner was calm and poised, although he was on his way to a momentous meeting.

Lee paused a moment, perhaps collecting himself, before turning toward the entrance of the grand house. Placide hurried up to him. "General Lee," he said.

Lee smiled. "You flatter me," he said. "I presently hold the rank of colonel." He waited patiently, apparently thinking that Placide was bringing him a message of some kind.

Placide was struck by Lee's gentle manner. There was intelligence in

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his eyes, but not the haggard, haunted look that would come later. In the few years remaining to him after the Insurrection, Lee always carried with him the painful knowledge that he had been, after all, the fatal betrayer of his homeland. "I have some important information for you, sir," Placide said. Now that he was before the man, the physicist was unsure how to proceed. After all, Lee wasn't the Great Traitor yet, not in this timeline. Placide had prevented him from becoming the savior of the Union in Universe$_2$, but he'd learned only that Lee dead was no better than Lee as Yankee. "May I have a moment of your time?"

Lee pursed his lips. "I have an appointment at this address, sir, and I am obliged by both courtesy and duty to respect it."

"I know," said Placide, "and I won't keep you long. When you go inside, Francis Preston Blair is going to offer you command of the Union Army, on behalf of President Lincoln. I know that you intend to accept; but if you do, sir, you will be damning future generations of American Negroes to lives of degradation and suffering. They will harbor a rage that will grow until our nation is torn by violence more terrible than this quarrel over secession. I beg you to reconsider."

Lee did not reply at once. He studied Placide's face for a long moment. "May I inquire, sir," he said quietly, "how you come to be in possession of this information?"

Placide took out his wallet and removed a fifty dollar bill—currency from the United States of his world, of his time. He handed it to Lee. The cavalry officer examined it in silence, first the back, with the picture of the Capitol Building, then the front, with his own portrait. "Sir, what is this?" he asked.

"Paper money," said Placide.

Lee turned the bill over and over in his hands. "Is it a banknote?"

"Legal tender printed by the Federal government, and backed by government gold reserves."

"I've never seen a note like it before," said Lee dubiously.

Placide showed him the small legend beside Lee's picture. "It was issued in 1932," he said.

Lee took a deep breath and let it out. Then he gave the money back to Placide. "Mr. Blair is an elderly man, and I do him no honor by my tardiness. I beg you to excuse me."

"General Lee," Placide pleaded, "if you accept Lincoln's offer, you must lead an invading army onto the soil of Virginia, your home. How can you raise your sword against your own family and friends? You must allow me to explain. I showed you the bill because you'd think me a madman unless I presented some evidence."

"Evidence only of the skill of your engraver," said Lee. "I did not find the portrait flattering, and I did not find the item in question amusing."

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As earnestly as he could, Placide explained to him that he'd come through time to let Lee know of the terrible consequences of his decision to defend the Union. "I can tell you that with you in command, the Army of the Potomac will withstand the first thrusts of the Confederate forces."

"Indeed, sir," said Lee with a little smile.

"And then you will sweep down to force the evacuation of Richmond. You will co-ordinate your army's movements with those of McClellan in the west, and divide the South into helpless fragments. In the meantime, the navy will blockade the ports along the Atlantic, the Gulf Coast, and the Mississippi River."

"Your predictions make the difficulties seem not so very daunting, after all."

Placide paid no attention to Lee's skepticism. "The Confederacy's only true victory will come at Petersburg, and only because of the incompetence of one of your subordinates, General Ambrose Burnside. Finally, on October 17, 1862, P. G. T. Beauregard will surrender the Army of Northern Virginia to you at Dry Pond, Georgia, northeast of Atlanta."

"And tell me, sir," said Lee, "will the Union thereafter be restored?"

"Yes," said Placide, "the Union will be restored, but in terrible circumstances." Placide described to him the fight over Reconciliation, and how the radical Republicans would seek to punish the Southern states. "All that will hold the country together in those furious months will be your strength of will as President," Placide told him.

Lee shook his head. "I am certain now that you offer me dreams and not prophecy. I cannot conceive of any circumstance that would persuade me to undertake that office. I have neither the temperament nor the wisdom."

"The Democrats will come to you, as a war hero and as a Southerner. You'll be the natural choice to oversee the process of Reconciliation. Congress will battle you, but your resolve will be as strong as Lincoln's. You'll prevent the plundering of the South."

"I am glad to hear this, but I wonder why you wish me then to decline the offer that awaits me inside. Would you see the South torn apart in peace to more horrible effect than in war?"

Placide felt a tremendous sympathy for this man, and he had to fight the urge to tell him all that would happen. In Placide's own world, Lee would die in 1870. Vice President Salmon P. Chase would then be sworn in, and the long, cruel struggle of the black would resume. Before his death, Lee would prepare a document emancipating all the slaves in the South; but on taking office Chase would find it convenient to set this initiative aside. The issue would still be the self-determination of the states. Chase would let progress on civil rights hang in abeyance rather

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than antagonize the newly-reconstituted Congress. Not until 1878, during the Custer administration, would slavery be officially abolished.

"Please try to understand," said Placide, "what seems like victory for you and for the Union will be, for the Negro population, the beginning of a dreadful spiral down into a social and economic abyss."

"I'm not certain that I take your meaning, sir," said Colonel Lee.

"I mean only that your concern for the slaves will blind you to the long-range effects of what Congress will propose. And after you've left the White House—" Placide still could not tell Lee how brief his tenure would be "—your successors will pervert your programs to trap the Negroes in misery. Even in my time, seventy-five years after the Insurrection, many Negroes believe that life as a slave must have been better than what they endure. As wretched as the condition of slavery is, the American Negro of 1938 has little more of freedom or opportunity or hope."

Lee was bemused by Placide's vehemence. "If I entertain your argument, sir, I am left with the feeling that all my actions will be futile, particularly those guided most strongly by my conscience."

"Millions of Negroes are forced to live in squalid slums the government calls 'Liberty Boroughs,' segregated from the prosperous white communities," Placide told him. "We suffer under the Legislated Equality programs, and—"

Lee raised a hand, cutting him off. "I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I am grateful to have your opinion, but I can tarry here no longer." He gave Placide a nod and strode up to the front door of Blair House.

Placide didn't know how effective his appeal had been. He was heartened to see, however, that as Lee turned away, his expression was solemn and thoughtful.

In his own timeline, Placide had read that Lee, as General-in-Chief of the Union Army, resisted the President's frequent pleas to attack the Confederate units across the Potomac in Virginia. "You must do something soon," Lincoln demanded late in July, 1861. "The army consists to a large degree of ninety-day recruits who volunteered after the attack on Fort Sumter. The period of enlistment has almost expired. When it does, those young men will leave the ranks and go back to their families, unless they are given something to inspire them to remain. You must use them to strike a strong and decisive blow."

Lee remained firm. "Our soldiers are simply not ready," he said. "The volunteers are poorly trained and poorly outfitted. It would be little more than murder to take such an unprepared mob into battle."

"A victory would encourage our soldiers and open the way to the capture of Richmond."

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Lee saw it differently. "A defeat," he argued, "would open the way for the enemy to capture Washington."

As the weeks went by, Lincoln continued to put pressure on Lee to act, even threatening to strip the General-in-Chief of his command, but Lee would not be bullied. When the ninety-day period came to an end, most of the recruits re-enlisted out of respect and admiration for Lee himself, and not the Federal cause. Lee used the time to deploy his troops with care and precision. He instructed his subordinates to hinder any advance of the Confederate Army, but to fall back slowly rather than engage. Finally, on September 1, Lee reported to the President and his Cabinet that he was satisfied. Two weeks later, at Occoquan, Virginia, Lee defeated a numerically superior Confederate force under the command of General Beauregard. Aided by Generals Irwin McDowell and Benjamin Butler, Lee prevented the Southern corps from crossing the Potomac into Maryland, and then encircling Washington.

The Battle of Occoquan was the smashing victory that Lincoln had hoped for. With one stroke, Lee crushed the dreams of the Confederacy. At Occoquan, he seized the offensive and never relinquished it for a moment during the rest of the war. The remainder of the eighteen-month struggle in the east saw little more than Beauregard's courageous though vain efforts to delay with his clever skirmishes and retreats the unavoidable outcome.

Inevitably, however, he was to have his most difficult meeting with Lee at Folkston's Dining Room in Dry Pond. Beauregard, the Napoleon in Gray, was as noble in defeat as Lee was gracious in victory. The two men had been friends when they'd served together in Mexico. They would be friends again when Lee was President and Beauregard governor of Louisiana.

All of this was a matter of record, but Placide knew just how easily the record could be erased.

Placide felt a mixture of hope and anxiety while he waited in the street outside Blair House. If Lee emerged as a Union general, if he became again the Great Traitor, Placide planned to return to T_0 and abandon this timeline. He would then have to hit on a more forceful method of persuading Lee—in $Universe_4$.

If, however, Placide had read Lee's expression correctly, then he planned to spend quite some time in $Universe_3$, making short jumps forward through time to follow the course of the Insurrection. With the invincible Robert E. Lee as the defender of the Confederacy's fortunes, the fate of the South would certainly be different.

Placide opened to the first page of the journal he intended to keep during his experiment. He wrote his first entry:

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Universe$_3$
April 18, 1861
Outside Blair House, Washington

If things turn out as I hope, I will remain in this newly-made world, studying it and perhaps learning something of value to take back with me to T_0. I will adopt this alternate timeline as my own, and love these people regardless of their sins, for have I not created them? Perhaps that sounds mad, but there has not yet been time enough to evaluate properly this unlooked-for benefit of my work. But surely I am a god to these people, having called them out of nothing, with the power to send their history off in whichever direction I choose. The God of Abraham created but the universe of T_0, and I have already created two more. How many others will I call into being before I achieve my purpose? General Lee comes now, with the fate of Universe$_3$ in his hands.

It was September 16, 1861, and the air should have been thick with drifting clouds of gunsmoke, the acrid breath of massed rifles; but the autumn breeze carried only the tang of burning firewood from a farmhouse nearby. There should have been the menacing, booming shocks of the field artillery, and the ragged cries of wounded men; but there was only stillness. The roads near Occoquan, Virginia, should have been jammed with wild-eyed, charging infantry, and the urgent mounted messengers of the generals; but only Thomas Placide disturbed the quiet countryside.

It was a grim, gloomy day in late summer, and black clouds threatened low overhead. It had not yet begun to rain, but a storm seemed imminent. Thunder cracked and rolled, and Placide grimaced. He did not like to be out in this kind of weather.

He was cheered only by the knowledge that he had truly persuaded Robert E. Lee, that a mechanism for the salvation of American blacks had been set in motion. All that now remained was the job of supervision, to make certain that Placide's careful scheme did not falter as this world's divergent history unfolded.

He shook his head. He wouldn't have guessed that this was the kind of day Lee would choose for his first major test as a general in the Confederate Army. Placide hurried down a rutted, dusty lane, to the white-painted frame farmhouse, hoping to meet someone who could direct him to the battlefield.

The house was surrounded by a bare yard and a gap-toothed fence. Placide went through the yawning gate and climbed three steps to the porch. He heard nothing from within the house. He rapped loudly. A

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moment later, a distracted white woman opened the door, gave Placide a critical look, and shut the door again. "Ma'am?" called Placide. "Will you help me, ma'am?"

The door opened again, and he was looking at a tall, burly, frowning man. "We got nothin' for you," said the farmer.

"I just need some directions from y'all," said Placide. He reminded himself that once again he needed to behave modestly.

"Directions we can afford, I guess," said the farmer.

Placide nodded gratefully. "I've got to find my way to the battle, and quickly."

The white man closed one eye and stared at him for a few seconds. "Battle?" he asked.

"I've got news for General Lee."

"You his boy?"

Placide felt a flush of anger, but he stifled it. "No, sir, I'm a free man of color. But I've got news for General Lee."

"What's this about a battle? There been no soldiers around here except when they came by in July. On their way to Manassas."

"Manassas? Where's that?"

The farmer gave him another close look. "Where the battle was. Bull Run. It was Beauregard and Joe Johnston that licked the Yankees at Bull Run. Your boss was busy fetchin' coffee cups for Jeffy Davis down in Richmond."

Placide wondered at how quickly men and events had found their new course. "General Lee is obliged to follow the wishes of President Davis," he said.

The farmer gave a derisive laugh. "While Granny Lee was doin' just that, one Sunday afternoon the blue boys come out of Washington, thinkin' they was goin' to whup Beauregard and send him on home. Then Joe Johnston showed up to help him out, and before you know it the damn Yankees are runnin' ever which way, goin' back to cry on Lincoln's shoulder."

Placide took all this in. "Well, sir," he said, "I guess they told me wrong when they said he'd come up here."

"Your General Lee ain't never been within fifty mile of here. As far as I know, he's somewheres off in the west, diddlin' around in the mountains."

"I thank you, sir. I suppose I'd just better get back to Richmond myself. Someone's made some kind of mistake."

The farmer laughed. "I'm lookin' right at him." He turned away and closed the door. Placide found that his hands were clenched into tight fists. He let out his breath slowly and forced himself to relax. He walked

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back out through the farmer's gate and headed back the way he'd come. He wanted to get back to the Cage before the heavy rain began.

Although he hated having to play the role of fool, Placide was elated by the news. He'd prevented the crushing Confederate defeat at Occoquan from occurring in $Universe_3$. There had been a mighty rebel victory that had not happened in Placide's timeline, and it had happened even without Robert E. Lee. With Lee yet on the verge of fulfilling his destiny, Placide could almost see the glory of the greater victories yet to come. He found himself smiling broadly as the first huge raindrops spatted about him in the dust.

$Universe_3$
October 17, 1862
Dry Pond, Georgia

For the second time, I've come to watch an event that has vanished from history. I suspected that would be the case, yet I jumped here from Occoquan anyway. Hearing the news of the Battle of Bull Run, I was of the opinion that I had wholly altered the course of the Insurrection. It would be unlikely in the extreme that its ending should now fall out just as it had in my own timeline, on the same day, at the same place, and for the same reasons. Still, I had to be certain.

In the deficient universe of my origin, Beauregard's surrender took place in the salon of Folkston's Dining Hall. I was not foolish enough to enter that white establishment by the front door. Rather, I went around to the rear of the building. There I won the sympathy of the kitchen slaves with a glib story of fear and desperation. They kindly gave me a good meal, some clothing more appropriate than my own, and a sum of money in both Confederate scrip and silver.

Of course, no one here has heard rumors of the approach of a triumphant Union Army. Everyone agrees that the fighting continues far to the north in Maryland, and far to the west in Mississippi. Yaakov was right: I have given this world a fiercer, longer conflict. In $Universe_3$, this is no mere Confederate Insurrection. This is civil war.

And how is the struggle going? My new friends have caught me up on the thirteen months I missed, jumping here from Occoquan: George McClellan is Lincoln's General-in-Chief (I am certain he is no Lee, and will hardly present an obstacle to Confederate triumph). There was a Southern victory at Ball's Bluff, Virginia, and a battle at Shiloh, in Tennessee, that wasn't much of a victory

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for the Federals or much of a defeat for the South. Lee defended Richmond against McClellan, and then, damn it!, Lee and Stonewall Jackson beat up the Yankees at Bull Run a second time! After that, Marse Robert tried to invade the North by heading up through Maryland—just as Beauregard tried in my own timeline. And just like Beauregard, Lee was stopped. He was stalled at Antietam Creek because a set of his campaign orders was lost and later discovered by Union soldiers.

If there is a turn for the worse, and if I must abandon $Universe_3$, I may begin again as I did at Blair House; but this time, I will remove in advance that careless officer at Antietam. "In for a penny, in for a pound." It was not enough, it seems, to have won Robert E. Lee to my cause. I find that I must continue to supervise and guide this entire war.

How astonished Dirac and the others will be when I return to T_0! I will seem to have aged several years in a single moment.

How sad I will be to leave a world I am perfecting, to return to a world I can no longer love.

Placide locked his door and went downstairs to dinner. The Negro rooming house was on Rampart Street, on the edge of the Vieux Carré. Placide had grown up in New Orleans, but that had been in the early years of the twentieth century. Here it was 1864, and the city was very different. There were still steamboats working on the river, and bales of cotton piled high on the wharves. He thought that somewhere in this quaint version of New Orleans, his own grandparents were growing up. He could visit them, if he chose to. The idea made him a little queasy.

A young quadroon woman waved to him. "Monsieur Placide," she called, "won't you sit beside me this evening?"

"I'd be delighted," he said. Her name was Lisette, and she'd been the mistress of the son of a prosperous businessman who lived above Canal Street in the American Sector. It was common for a young white man of means to select a light-skinned girl like Lisette and establish her in a small house of her own on Rampart or Burgundy Streets. It was her misfortune that the boy's interest had waned, and he no longer supported her. Now she was looking for a new friend—a new white friend. The quadroon beauty disdained forming attachments to black men. When she'd called to Placide, she was just practicing her social graces.

"You always have so much interesting gossip," she said.

Placide sighed and held her chair for her, then seated himself. "I wonder what Mrs. Le Moyne has for us tonight," he said.

Mrs. Le Moyne came into the dining room and gave Placide a dour

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look. "I will serve y'all what I always serve," she said. "And that is, sir, what little the damn Yankees haven't taken for themselves or spoiled."

Placide rose slightly from his seat and gave her a little bow. "You work miracles, madame," he said.

"I'm sure, sir, that you wish I could," said Mrs. Le Moyne. She went back out into the kitchen.

"Isn't she a charmer?" whispered Lisette.

Another of the tenants sat down across the table from them. He was a surgeon's assistant in the black community. Placide thought the man always seemed to know too much of everyone else's business. "Will you be leaving us again soon, Mr. Placide?" he asked.

"Yes," said Placide. "Tomorrow."

"Where are you going?" asked Lisette. "Don't the Yankees stop you from traveling?"

Placide shrugged. "I don't worry about them."

The black man across the table laughed. "Then you must be the only person in New Orleans who doesn't."

"How long will you be gone?" asked Lisette.

"Maybe a month or two," said Placide. "Maybe longer." He thought of the Cage, safe upstairs in his room. The War of Southern Independence was proceeding differently than he'd planned. Lee's final northward thrust had been turned back at Gettysburg. The Confederate nation now had little hope of victory, but it still fought grimly on. Oddly, though, Placide was not wholly dissatisfied. What mattered was that Lincoln had been driven to a point of urgency. Politics might yet achieve for blacks what military might had not.

Almost a year before, desperate to rally continued support for his war effort, Lincoln had issued what he called an Emancipation Proclamation. In Placide's timeline, with Lee leading the Federal forces to quick victory in 1862, Lincoln was never pressed to make such a concession. And in $Universe_2$, with Lee killed before the Insurrection even began, Lincoln considered freeing the slaves but put the idea aside when victory proved imminent in 1863.

Only here in $Universe_3$, in the spring of 1864, with Lee in a grim and determined struggle to hold off defeat as long as possible, could Placide see some hope that American blacks might avoid the horror of what President James G. Blaine had so sanctimoniously called "Parallel Development."

"Mr. Placide," said Lisette sweetly, "would you bring me back something pretty from your travels? I'd be ever so grateful." She gave him a dazzling smile.

He was neither flattered nor fooled. He thought that with luck he'd bring her freedom and dignity, although he was sure she'd much rather

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have a new dress from New York. He only smiled back at the young woman, then turned his attention to the food Mrs. Le Moyne was carrying in from the kitchen.

Universe$_3$
March 22, 1884
New Orleans, Louisiana

Shock has followed shock: Even with Lee at last General-in-Chief, the Confederate hopes ended in 1865. It's as if God Almighty has decreed that it must happen just so in all worlds, all timelines, across the breadth of the manifold realities. Evidently the South cannot win, with Lee or without him. There are economic, social, and political reasons too vast for me to correct with so simple a plan.

Today, in a raging downpour, I witnessed the dedication of a handsome, brooding bronze statue of General Lee. The monument stands upon a column seventy feet above the traffic of St. Charles Avenue. Lee gazes resolutely northward, as if grimly contemplating the designs not only of the Union Army, but also of the subtle and guileful Yankee mind. It is a statue I have seen before, although in the world of my childhood the model was P. G. T. Beauregard, and not Robert E. Lee. I knew the area as Beauregard Place; here it has been newly named Lee Circle. In this timeline, of course, Lee is not the Great Traitor. He is idolized as a hero and the defender of the Southern way of life, despite the fact that it was his defeat that ended both the war and what is already being spoken of as "The Old South." To me (and possibly to me alone), he is the Great Failure.

I see that I must begin again. If Lee is to be successful in Universe$_4$, I must take a greater hand in arranging things. Perhaps Lincoln should die in 1862. Perhaps Jefferson Davis should also be removed, or at least be firmly persuaded to leave Beauregard with his command and to make better and timelier use of Lee's abilities. I have the leisure to consider these matters, as I intend to make a few more jumps to evaluate the fate of the Negroes in this timeline before I return at last to T_0.

On one hand, this world doesn't know either the corruption of the Custer and Blaine administrations, or the abuses of Chase's program of Reconciliation. On the other hand, it has suffered through the different though no less odious crookedness of Ulysses Grant's two terms. I wonder where Grant came from. If he played any important part at all in the universe of my origin, I never

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read any reference to it. Yet here he emerged as a shrewd tactician, a victor, and a president. More important to me, though, is that he oversaw most of Reconstruction and permitted the wholesale rape of the South.

Reconstruction was a grotesque injustice inflicted on a conquered population. In my world, the brief Confederate Insurrection and Lee's vigilance as President prevented Congress from exacting such harsh penalties on the South. Even the ancient Romans knew better than to impose tyrannical conditions on a defeated people.

Here in Universe$_3$, almost twenty years after the war's end, I see continued evidence of the South's rage and indignation. The Southern attitude, shaped by the war and by Reconstruction, is a desperate desire to cling to what little yet remains of the old ways and the old life. There have been many attempts to circumvent the will of the Yankee, even to reviving slavery under new guises. This is, all in all, a bitter, unhealthy society.

And yet I will remain in this timeline a little while longer. I plan to look around 1884 for another few days, and then jump to 1938 and Göttingen, just a week or so before T_0, so that I will remain in Universe$_3$. I'm very curious to see what changes my experiment makes in the rest of the world after seventy-five years.

Despite the problems here, it is a more hopeful world for the Negro. Amendments to the U.S. Constitution have abolished slavery, guaranteed civil rights, and given Negroes the right to vote. Southern state legislatures have seated many Negroes, and some Negroes have been elected to office as high as lieutenant governor or been sent to Washington as senators and district representatives. In my timeline, slavery wasn't abolished until 1878, while in 1938 most Southern Negroes still can't vote, let alone run for office.

The version here of Blaine's "Parallel Development" is segregation, which is not so absolute and despotic, but is still highly offensive. In the New Orleans of my world, Negroes may live only in specially zoned Liberty Boroughs, which are crowded, undeveloped neighborhoods with virtually no communication or trade with each other or with the white community. Negroes here are permitted by law to take up residence wherever they choose, although in actual practice it is impossible for Negroes to find homes in many white areas.

In Universe$_3$, Negroes may travel freely within the city and throughout the South. They may not always be made welcome, of course, but no official restrictions are placed on their movements. In the America I abandoned, a Negro must still carry an endorse-

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ment book, which records his assigned Liberty Borough and prevents him from traveling beyond it without a special permit. At any time the state government may move individuals or groups of Negroes from one Liberty Borough to another, sometimes without warning, explanation, or recourse. There are many more similar provisions of the Blaine program, and most of them are happily absent from this timeline.

At the close of the war, the South lay ruined and bankrupt. My experiment ended in tragedies I did not foresee and that have no counterpart in my world. The burning of Atlanta, Sherman's march of devastation from that city's ashes to the Atlantic coast, and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln all occurred as a result of what I set in motion. The war went on three and a half years longer than in my timeline, where some one hundred thousand soldiers died in the Confederate Insurrection. In $Universe_3$, more than *six* hundred thousand perished in the Civil War.

That nameless army guard outside General Twiggs' quarters did not seem real to me at the time. Why has it taken vast mountains of dead soldiers to make me see the full extent of what I've done? Nevertheless, I believe now that although the cost has been high, I have succeeded in my dream of improving the lot of my people, at least to a small degree. I am confident that the end has truly justified the means.

Placide jumped to 1938, to T_0 minus seven days. He felt like a trespasser. It gave him an eerie feeling to walk around the university town of Göttingen, knowing that there was very likely a duplicate of himself nearby, one who had lived his whole life in $Universe_3$.

There were important differences between the two timelines. Some of the streets and buildings here had new names, clothing styles were oddly altered, and there were unfamiliar flags and signs wherever he looked. The degree of change depended on how much influence the United States had in this alternate reality. After the Confederate Insurrection in his own timeline, the North and South hadn't joined together strongly enough to make America an international power comparable to England, France, Germany, or Russia. Placide could not predict how in $Universe_3$ the bloodier Civil War might have affected that situation.

He climbed the steps of the laboratory, which in his own world had been in the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute; the building was now called the Max Planck Institute. He found what had been his own office, but a stranger's name was now on the door. As he walked down the darkened hallway reading notices and posters, he met the building's elderly porter.

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Placide was cheered that, despite all, some things remained the same. "Good afternoon, Peter," he said.

The old man cocked his head and studied him. "May I help you?" he asked. His tone was suspicious.

"Don't you know me?"

Peter shook his head. "We don't see many black men here."

Whatever other changes had been made in Universe$_3$, Placide evidently had not pursued his studies in the German Empire. "I'm looking for a few of my colleagues," he said.

Peter raised his eyebrows.

"Werner Heisenberg," said Placide.

"Ah, Dr. Heisenberg's no longer here. He's gone to Berlin, to the other Max Planck Institute."

"Well, then, how about Dr. Schrödinger?"

"He went to Austria. That's where he's from, you know. But I think I've heard that since then he's gone on to England."

"Paul Dirac?"

"He's at Cambridge now."

Placide wondered if this scattering of his colleagues meant that the discoveries they'd made together had not been made in this world. "La Martine and Marquand?"

"I'm sorry, but there's never been anyone here by those names in the years I've worked here."

That made Placide uncomfortable. "Yaakov Fein?"

Peter's expression grew even more cautious. "Who are these men?" he asked.

"Albert Einstein?"

"Gone to live in America."

"Tell me about Max Born. Max must still be here."

"He's now at the University of Edinburgh. He's a British subject."

Placide felt gripped by a cold despair. He suspected that there was no Placide-Born-Dirac Effect in Universe$_3$, and no Cage, either. "These men were friends of mine," he said. "Do you mind if I look around here for a little while? I planned to come work here myself once."

Peter gave him a dubious look, but nodded his head. "I guess it will be all right, if you don't disturb anything."

"I won't." The old porter left him alone in the dusty, drafty corridor.

A quarter of an hour later, while Placide was inspecting some primitive laboratory equipment, two men in the uniform of the town's police approached him. "Will you come with us, sir?" one said.

"Why should I?" asked Placide.

"We must establish your identity. Please show us your papers."

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He'd been afraid this might happen. He knew he could be in serious trouble now. "I'm a German citizen," he said.

It was obvious that the policemen didn't believe him. "If that's true," said the second officer, "we'll get this cleared up quickly at headquarters." There was nothing else for Placide to do but go along.

Some time later he was led to a jail cell. He'd had no identification, and none of his references existed in this timeline or could be produced to vouch for him. As the jailer clanged the cell door shut he said, "Make yourself comfortable, Dr. Placide. I'm sure there's been some misunderstanding. In the meantime, you'll just have to make the best of it here."

Placide nodded. The jailer went away, leaving him in a small, dim cell with another prisoner. "How good of you to drop in," said the other man. Placide lay on his hard bunk and stared sullenly at the ceiling. The air was stale, and there was a heavy smell of urine and vomit.

"My name is Schindler," said his cellmate. "I'm a thief, but not a very good one."

"Apparently," murmured Placide.

Schindler laughed. "What got you nicked?"

"No identification."

"That's a hanging offense in this town, friend. Where are you from?"

"The United States, originally. But I've lived in Germany for a few years."

Schindler whistled tunelessly for a little while. "What do you do in Germany?" he asked at last.

"I'm a scientist," said Placide. "Particle physics, quantum mechanics. Nothing that would interest the average person."

"Jewish physics," said Schindler, laughing again. "Einstein and that gang, right?"

"Yes," said Placide, puzzled.

"No wonder you're locked up."

"What do you mean, 'Jewish physics'?"

"The government's official policy is that sort of thing isn't politically correct."

"Politically correct?" cried Placide. "Science is science, truth is truth!"

"And the National Socialists decide which is which."

They talked for some time, and Schindler gave him a great deal to think about. After a while, Placide told the good-humored thief about the Cage and his adventures traveling from one universe to another. Schindler was skeptical, but he stopped short of calling Placide a liar. The two men compared what they knew of recent history in their divergent worlds.

Here in Universe$_3$, the United States had taken part in the Great War, and the German Empire had come to an end. In response to the Depres-

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sion, and growing out of Germany's bitterness after the war, a party of fascists came to power in Berlin. Many talented people, liberals and Jews and other persecuted groups, fled Germany soon after that.

"You shouldn't admit that you even knew those people," advised Schindler. "You won't do yourself any good."

"What can they do to me?"

Schindler laid a finger alongside his nose and spoke in a hushed voice. "They can send you to the camps," he said.

"What kind of camps?"

"The kind of place where your friend Einstein might have been sent. Where lots of brilliant but racially inferior scientists are hauling boulders around until they drop dead." He gave Placide a meaningful look.

It was too crazy for Placide to believe, but still he began making plans to escape. When he was released, he'd use the Cage to get out of this stifling reality as quickly as he could. In the meantime, he hoped that the mechanism of the German government would operate efficiently.

Weeks later he was granted a hearing. He sat in a small room at a wooden table, while several strangers testified that he was insane. Peter the porter was brought in. He identified Placide as the man who'd wandered into the laboratory and asked after the decadent physicists. Schindler reported everything Placide had told him, and added his own embellishments. Quite obviously, he'd been put in the cell with Placide as an informer.

Placide himself was not permitted to testify. He was judged insane. The American embassy could find no record of him in New Orleans; the examining board ironically chose to believe only one item of Placide's story, that he was a naturalized German. Therefore, it had the authority to remand him to a clinic for the mentally disturbed in Brandenburg. After the hearing, he was locked up again, along with Schindler.

"You goddamn spy!" cried Placide. His voice echoed in the cold stone cell.

Schindler shrugged. "Everyone is a spy these days," he said. "I'm sorry you're upset. Let me make it up to you. I'll give you some advice: Be careful when you get to Brandenburg." He lay down on his narrow wooden bunk and turned away from Placide.

"What are you talking about?"

Schindler took out a penknife and began chipping at the mortar between two blocks in the wall. "I mean, that clinic isn't what it appears to be. The Brandenburg clinic is a euthanasia center, friend. So when you go in, just take a deep breath and try to hold it as long as you can."

Schindler's knife was making a rasping, gritty sound. Placide stared at his back. "I'm being sent to a mental health clinic."

"Carbon monoxide," said Schindler, turning to face him. "That's the

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only treatment they use. Look, you say you helped the Negroes of your country, but see what you've let loose in the world instead! When they drag you into that narrow room, think about that. Think about all the other people who are going to follow you to the gas, and decide if it was worth it."

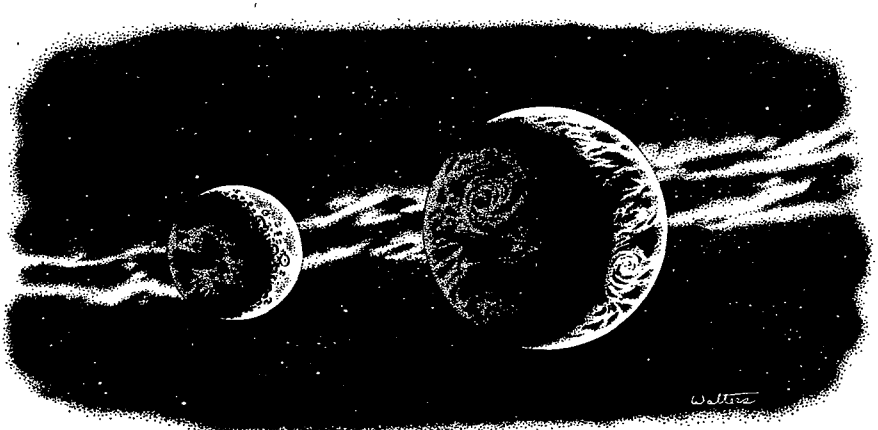
Placide shut his eyes tightly. "Of course it was worth it," he said fiercely. "All that I've discovered. All that I've accomplished. I only regret that I won't be able to go back to T_0 and report to the others. Then I'd go back to 1860 and try again, correct my mistakes. Even if it took me two or three more attempts, I'd succeed eventually. And then I could move on to another time, another problem. We could create a committee to guide similar experiments all through history, relieving suffering and oppression wherever we chose."

Schindler jammed his penknife into the wooden frame of the bunk. "You *are* insane, Placide, do you know that? You haven't learned a goddamn thing. You'd charge right ahead if you could, and who knows what new horrors you'd instigate? You've got a rare talent for making good times hard, and hard times worse."

"I have one chance," Placide murmured thoughtfully, not hearing Schindler's words at all. "*Another* Thomas Placide, from another parallel reality, may be aware of my trouble here. He may be searching for me this very minute. I have to hang onto that hope. I must have faith."

Schindler laughed as if he'd never heard anything so funny in his life.

And while Nazi guards patrolled the hallway beyond the cell's iron-barred door, Placide began planning what he would do when he was released, and where he would go, and on whom he'd revenge himself. ●



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"Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." Those words were not penned by a dedicated employee of the United States Postal Service. They were written by Herodotus, in about 450 B.C., and he was talking about the postal system of the Persians.

The first postage stamps in the world came long after the first postal service. They were introduced in Great Britain, in 1840. They were the Penny Black and the Twopenny Blue, and the picture on their face was based on the 1837 medal portrait of Queen Victoria engraved by W. Wyon.

A *reprint* is a stamp printed from the original plate after that stamp is no longer valid for use as postage. Its existence tends to depreciate the price to collectors of the original stamps.

Philately, as a term used to describe the collecting of postage stamps, was a word coined in 1865 by a Frenchman, Monsieur Herpin. Before that, stamp collecting was known by the less complimentary term of *timbromania.*

Everyone in the world knows these things. Don't they? That's what Tom Walton seemed to believe when I first met him.

I went to his shop on 15th Street in downtown Washington in early May, on a warm and pleasant afternoon. A reporter friend of mine had given me his name and the address of his store, and assured me that he knew more about stamps than any ten other people combined. To tell the truth, it was only faith in my friend Jill's opinions that persuaded me to go into that shop. The storefront was a hefty metal grating over dirty glass, and behind it on display in the window I saw nothing but a couple of battered leather books and a metal roller. It was a dump, the sort of shop you walk past without even noticing it's there.

The inside was no better. Narrow and gloomy, with a long wooden counter running across the middle to separate the customer from the shopkeeper. Bare dusty boards formed the floor and one unshaded light-bulb just above the counter served as the only illumination. Cobwebs hung across all the corners of the ceiling. As furniture there was one stool on my side and a tall armchair on the other. In that chair, peering through a jeweller's loupe at a stamp in its little cover of transparent plastic, sat a fat man in his early twenties. At the ring of the shop's doorbell he took the lens away from his eye and gave me a frown of greeting.

"Mr. Walton?" I said.

"Mmph. Yer-yes." A quiet voice, with the hint of a stammer.

"I'm Rachel Banks. I don't want to buy any stamps, or sell any, but I wondered if you could spare me a few minutes of your time. Jill Fahnestock gave me your name."

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"Mm. Mmph. Yes."

It occurred to me that I should have asked Jill a few more questions. I hadn't, because there had been a fond tone in her voice that made me think Tom Walton might be an old boyfriend of hers. But seeing him now I felt sure that wasn't the case. Jill was one of the beautiful people, well-groomed and chic and dressed always in the latest fashions. Tom Walton was nice looking in a chubby sort of way, with curly fair hair, a beautiful mouth, and innocent blue eyes. But he hovered right at the indefinable boundary of fatness beyond which I cannot see a man as a physically attractive object. Also he hadn't shaved, his shirt was poorly ironed, and he was wearing a baggy cover-all cardigan that was as shapeless as he was. There was even a smudge of oil or something around his left eye that had come from the lens he had been using.

Not Jilly's type. Not at all.

"I have a question," I said. "About a postage stamp. Or what may be a postage stamp. Jill thought you might be able to help me."

"Ah." At least that was a positive sound, a tone approaching interest. But I still had to get the preliminaries out of the way. I'd been in trouble before when I didn't announce at once who I was and what I was doing.

"I'm a private investigator," I said. "Here's my credentials."

He hardly glanced at the card and badge I held out to him. Instead, a faint expression of incredulity crept across his face, while he stared first at my face, then at my purse.

"Hmph," he said. "Hmph."

Those particular "hmph" 's I could read. They meant, you don't look tough enough to be a private eye. Too young, too nervous. And anyway, where's your gun? (Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett—I'd like to bring them back to life long enough to strangle the pair of them. Between them they ruined the image.)

"I'm investigating the disappearance of Jason Lockyer," I said. I *was* nervous, no doubt about it. Eleanor Lockyer had that effect on me.

"Jason Lockyer. Never heard of him."

"No reason you would have. Mind if I sit down?"

I took his silence for assent and perched on the stool. Tall and skinny I may be, but high chairs were made for legs like mine.

"Lockyer is a biologist," I went on. "A specialist in algae and slime molds and a number of other things I'm forced to admit I know nothing about. He's famous in his own field, a man in his early sixties, very distinguished to look at and apparently a first-rate teacher. He's on the faculty over at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, as a full professor of an endowed chair, and he has an apartment there. But he also keeps an apartment here in Washington. Not to mention an apartment in Coral

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Gables and half an island that he owns in Maine. As you'll guess from all that, he's loaded."

With some people you can lose it right there. They resent other people's money so much, they can't work around them. Tom Walton showed nothing more than a mild disinterest in Jason Lockyer's diverse homes, and I went on: "He usually spent most of the week over on campus in Baltimore, and his wife is mostly down in Florida. So when he disappeared a couple of weeks ago she didn't even realize it for three or four days. She called me in last Friday."

"Why you? Why not the p–police?"

The question came so quickly and easily that I revised my first impression of Walton. Slob, maybe, but not dumb.

"The police, too. But Eleanor Lockyer doesn't have much faith in them. When she reported that he had disappeared, all they did was file a report."

"Yeah, I know the feeling. Same as they did when my shop was robbed last year."

"She expected more. She thought when she called them they would run off and hunt for him in all directions. As it was they didn't even come to search their apartment."

I was losing him. He was starting to fidget in the armchair and fiddle with the jeweller's loupe on the counter in front of him. It didn't look as though he'd had a customer in days, but I probably had only two more minutes before he made up a reason why he was too busy to listen to me.

I opened my bag and took out a 9 by 12 manila envelope. "But I did search the apartments," I said. "All four, the one here in Washington and the one in Baltimore and then the other two. No signs that he left in a hurry, no signs of any problem. A dead loss in fact, except for one oddity. An empty envelope in the Baltimore apartment, addressed to Jason Lockyer—didn't say Professor, didn't say Doctor, just Jason Lockyer—standard IBM Selectric II typewriter, but there was a very odd stamp on it. Here."

I took the photograph out of the envelope and slid it across the counter. It was an 8x11 color print and I was rather proud of it. I had taken it with a high-power magnifying lens, and after half a dozen attempts I had obtained a picture with both good color balance and sharp focus. The image showed the head of a black-faced doll with staring eyes and straight hair sticking up wildly like a stiff black brush. The doll was black and green and red, and an oval red border ran around it. At the bottom of the stamp was a figure "1" and the words, "One Googol."

My satisfaction at the work was not shared by Tom Walton. He was staring at the photo with disdain.

"It's a color enlargement," I said. "Of the postage stamp. And the picture in the middle there—"

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"It's a golliwog."

That piece of information had taken me hours to discover.

"How did you know? Until two days ago I had never even *heard* of a golliwog."

"I used to have a doll like this when I was a kid." He was a little embarrassed, but the sight of the picture had brought him to life. "Matter of fact, it was my f–favorite toy."

"I never knew a doll like that existed—I had to ask dozens of people before I found one who knew what it is. It started out as a character in children's books, you know, nearly a hundred years ago. How on earth did you get one to play with?"

"Aw, I guess it was a pretty old doll. Handed down, like."

"I know the feeling—all the clothes I ever saw came from my big sister."

For some reason he looked away awkwardly when I said that. I reached out and touched the photo. "This is a picture of the stamp, the best one I could take of it. I was wondering what you might be able to tell me about where it was made, maybe where it came from."

He hardly glanced at it before shaking his head. "You don't understand," he said. "This is useless. And it's not a stamp intended for use as real postage."

"How do you know?"

"Well, for a start you'll notice that it hasn't been postmarked. It was on an envelope but it was never intended to go through the mails. More important, a googol is ten to the hundredth. Making a stamp that says it has a value of 'one googol' is the sort of joke that the math class would have done back at Princeton."

It had taken me another half hour to discover what a googol was. "You went to Princeton?"

"For a while. I dropped out." His voice was unemotional as he went on: "There are plenty of interesting stamps that were never intended for postage and don't have currency value—Christmas seals, for example, that Holboll introduced in 1903 as part of an anti-tuberculosis campaign. Some people collect those. But what you have given me isn't a stamp at all. It's just a *picture* of a stamp, and that's a whole lot different. For instance, you missed off the most important piece."

"Which is?"

"The edges. You've blown the main picture up big, and that's good, but to get it you've cropped all four edges. I can't see how it's perforated. That's the first problem. Then there's the materials—the dyes and the gum, you can't tell one thing about them from a photograph. And what about the type of paper that was used? And the watermark. Look, you

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said you found the stamp in Lockyer's apartment. Don't you have it anymore?"

"I do."

"Then why on earth didn't you bring it with you? I've got all sorts of things in the back of my shop just for looking at stamps." He leaned closer across the counter. "If you would let me take a look at it here I'm sure I could squeeze out some information. There are analytical techniques available today that no one dreamed of twenty years ago."

Finally, some enthusiasm—and such enthusiasm! He was itching to get his hands on the golliwog stamp. I wanted to hear more, but whatever miracles he had in the back of the shop were apparently of no interest to my stomach. It chose that moment to give a long, gurgling groan of complaint. I had breakfasted on a cup of black coffee and lunched in mid-morning on a dry bagel, and it was now after five. Hunger and nerves. I put my hand on my midriff.

"Pardon me. I think that's trying to tell me something. Look, I'm sorry about not bringing the stamp. It's locked up in my safe. I've grown so used to protecting original materials—if I don't do it, the courts and the lawyers beat me into the ground. But if you'll let me pick your brains some more for the price of dinner . . ." He was going to say no, I knew it, and I hurried on, "—then I'll go get the stamp and bring it here in the morning. And if there's work for you to do—for God's sake don't destroy that stamp, though—I'll tell Mrs. Lockyer that I need you and I'll pay you at the same rate I'm being paid."

"How much?"

"Three hundred and fifty a day, plus expenses."

He didn't seem thrilled by the prospect, though it was hard to believe he made that much in a month in the store. I think it was the chance of getting a look at the stamp that sold him, because he finally nodded and said, "Let me lock up."

He turned to the unpainted inner door of the store and shielded the lock from me with his body while he did something to it.

"Not much in there to appeal to your average downtown thief," he said when he was done. He sounded apologetic. "No trade-in value, but a lot of the things are valuable to me."

Did Tom Walton spend everything he had on stamps? That idea was strengthened when we went out to his car, parked in the alley behind the store, and drove off to the Iron Gate Inn on N Street. He drove a 1974 white Dodge Dart rusted through at the bottom of the doors and under the fenders. I think cars are one of humanity's most boring inventions, but even I noticed that this vehicle was due for retirement.

I was a regular at the restaurant and I knew the menu by heart. He insisted on studying it carefully, a fixed stare of concentration on his

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face. I had the impression that he was more accustomed to food that came out of a paper bag.

While he read the menu I had an opportunity for a closer look at him. I changed my original estimate of his age. His innocent face said early twenties, but his hair was thinning at the temples. (Later, when I referred to him to Jill Fahnestock as "the Walton kid" she stared at me and said, "Kid? He's thirty-two—three years older than you." "But he looks—I don't know—brand-new." "You mean *unused*. I know. There's more to Tom than meets the eye.")

There was quite a bit of him that did meet the eye. "I'm on a diet," he explained, when he was ready to order.

"I see." Not before time, but I could hardly tell him that. "How long have you been dieting?"

"This time?" He paused. "Four years, almost."

Then he went ahead, quite unselfconsciously, to order and eat a vast meal of humous, cous-cous, and beer. I couldn't complain, because he was also determined to earn his dinner. We talked about stamps, and only stamps. At first I made a feeble attempt to take notes but after a few minutes I concentrated on my own food. There was no way I would remember all that he said, and with him as my consultant I didn't need to.

Stamps are colored bits of paper that you lick and stick on letters, right?

Not to Tom Walton and a million other people. To the collectors, stamps are an obsession and an endless search. They spend their lives rummaging through dusty old collections, or bidding on large lots at auctions to get a single stamp, or writing letters all over the world for first-day covers. They have their own vocabulary—*double impressions* (where a sheet of stamps has been put through the press twice, and the second imprint is slightly off from the first one); *mint* (a stamp with its original gum undamaged and with an unblemished face); *inverted center* (when a stamp is made using two plates, and a sheet is accidentally reversed when it is passed through the second press, so the stamp's center is upside down relative to its frame); *tete-beche* (where a plate has been made with one stamp upside down in the whole sheet of stamps).

They also have their own versions of the Holy Grail, stamps so rare and valuable that only the museums and super-rich collectors can own them: the 1856 "One-Penny Magenta" stamp from British Guiana; the Cape of Good Hope "Triangle" from the 1850s; the 1843 Brazilian "Bull's-Eye," first stamp issued in the western hemisphere; the tri-colored Basle "Dove" issued in Switzerland in 1845; the 1847 Mauritius "Post Office" stamp.

And there are the anomalies, the stamps that are interesting because

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of some defect in their manufacture. Tom Walton owned a 1918 U.S. Airmail stamp, an example of an inverted center in which the plane in the stamp's center is flying upside-down. He told me it was very rare, with only one sheet of a hundred stamps ever reaching the public.

I don't know how much time he spent alone in that store of his but he was starved for company. He would probably have talked to me all evening, and to my surprise I was enjoying listening to him. But by the time we were onto baklava and a second cup of coffee my own preoccupations were beginning to take over.

"I'm sorry, Tom." I interrupted his description of the "$1.00 Trans-Mississippi" commemorative stamp, one of his favorites. "But I've got to pay the check and go now. I promised Mrs. Lockyer that I'd be over to see her this evening at her apartment."

He nodded. "Ready when you are, Rachel."

He seemed to assume that he was going with me. I hadn't intended it, but it made sense. If I were considering adding him to the payroll it was a near-certainty that Eleanor Lockyer would want to talk to him. (Though I was not sure that I wanted to expose *him* to *her.)*

The Lockyer apartment was out in yuppie-land on Massachusetts Avenue, far from any subway stop. Tom Walton's car received an incredulous look from the guard at the main entrance, but when we told him who we were going to see he couldn't refuse to let us in. We parked between a Mercedes 560 and an Audi 5000. Tom carefully checked that all his car doors were locked.

As we went inside and entered the elevator I decided that the second cup of coffee had been a mistake. I have an incipient ulcer, and my stomach hurt. Then I decided that the coffee was not to blame. What was getting to me was the prospect of another meeting with Eleanor Lockyer.

She was on the telephone when the maid ushered us in, and she took her time in finishing the conversation. We were not invited to sit down. She was obviously preparing to go out, because she was wearing a long dress and a cape that my year's income would not have paid for. I introduced Tom Walton as someone who was helping me with the investigation. She gave him the briefest of glances with bored grey eyes, dismissed him as a nonentity, and waved her arm at the table.

"Jason's mail for the past two days. I haven't looked at most of it, but you probably want to open it all and see what's there."

"I'll do that," I said. Tom Walton began to edge his way over to the stack of letters and envelopes.

"Right. You've been working on this for four days now. I hope you have results. What have you found out?"

"Quite a bit. We're making good progress." The tone in her voice was so critical I felt obliged to overstate what I had done. "First, we can rule

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out any possibility of kidnapping. Wherever he went, his trip was planned. The woman who cleaned the apartment in Baltimore is sure that there are a couple of suitcases missing, along with his clothes and toilet articles. She also thinks there are some spaces in the bookcases, but she can't remember what books used to be there, though they were in the middle of a group of books about single-celled plants and animals. Second, he's almost certainly still somewhere in this country. His passport was in his study here. Third—the absolute clincher, in my opinion—he left his notes for the rest of the semester with his Teaching Assistant at the university. Fourth—"

"But *where* is he?" she interrupted.

"I don't know."

"And you call that *progress?* You're telling me he could be anywhere in fifty states, millions of square miles, and you've no idea where, or how to find him. That's not what I'm paying you for. What good does that do me?"

"It's part of the whole investigative process. We have to rule out certain possibilities before I can explore others. For instance, now that we know he wasn't abducted against his will—Mrs. Lockyer, I don't know an easy way to ask this; but is there any chance that Jason Lockyer might have had a girlfriend?"

She didn't laugh. She sneered. "Jason? Why not ask a sensible question? He has the sex drive of a lettuce. One woman in his life is too much for him."

You'd be too much for most people. But that's the sort of thing you think and don't say. Fortunately I didn't have to ask a "sensible question" because we were interrupted by a loud whistle from Tom Walton.

"Look at this letter!" he said. "Professor Lockyer is going to be awarded the Copley Medal of the Royal Society, for his work on bacterial DNA transfer. That's really great."

It was a breakthrough, of sorts. It proved that Tom Walton was interested in something other than postage stamps.

But it did nothing for Eleanor Lockyer. She changed the direction of her scorn. "That's just the sort of nonsense I've had to put up with for five years. Bacteria, and worms, and slimes. If anyone deserves a medal it's *me,* having to live with that sort of rubbish." The buzzer sounded. She looked at her watch, then at me. "I must say, I'm most disappointed and dismayed by your lack of progress. You have to do better or I'm certainly not going to keep on paying you for nothing. Get to work. Look at this apartment again, and go over that mail with a toothcomb. When you are finished here Maria will let you out. I have to go. General Shellstock's limousine is waiting downstairs and the General asked me to be on time."

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She was turning to leave when Tom Walton said quietly, "Walter Shellstock, by any chance?"

"Yes. He's visiting Washington for a few days."

"Say hello."

"Hello? You mean from *you?*"

"Sure. Wally Shellstock's my godfather."

It was a pleasure to watch Eleanor Lockyer's reaction. Her bottom lip went down so far that I could see the receding gum-line on her lower teeth, and she said, "*You.* You're . . . But who? . . ."

She had forgotten his name, or never registered it when I introduced them.

He realized her problem. "Well, in business I just use Tom Walton. But my full name is Thomas Walton Shellstock. Actually it's Thomas Walton Shellstock the Fourth, though I don't know why anyone would care about counting the numbers."

"The *Pennsylvania* Shellstocks?"

"That's right. Well, have fun with Wally." Tom turned back to the pile of letters, peering at each one and ignoring Eleanor.

I've never seen a woman so torn. The buzzer sounded again, this time more urgently. She turned toward the door, but then she hurried back and took Tom by the arm.

"Thomas, I'm having a small dinner party here next week. I'd love it if you could come."

"Send me an invitation. Rachel has my address."

"Of course. You and . . ." She turned to give me a look of frustration. It meant, I sure as hell don't want to have to invite *you,* you're the hired help—but I'm not sure what your relationship is to Thomas Walton Shellstock, and if you two are screwing I may have to include you just to get him.

"Both of you," she said at last. Tom didn't give her another look, and finally she went out.

"You'd really come to her dinner party?" I said. I had a lot of questions but that seemed like the most important one.

"What do you think? Saying 'send me an invitation' is a lot easier than saying no in person."

"What are the Pennsylvania Shellstocks? She almost dropped her teeth."

"Ah." He had finished looking at the stamps on the unopened letters, and now he was sitting idly at the table. " 'Old money, my d-dear,' " he said in a falsetto. " 'The only *real* kind of money.' That's what people like Mrs. Lockyer say—and that's why I don't use my full name. We happen to have rather a lot of it—money, I mean, no thanks to me. Isn't she revolting?"

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"I wondered if it was just me. When I hear her talk about her husband it doesn't sound like she wants me to find him. It sounds like she wants me to prove he's *dead.*"

"I don't understand why they're married at all. You said he's in his sixties, she can't be more than forty."

"Forty-five, if she's a day," I said. Pure malice. "His first wife died—he's got grown-up kids, and contacting them is on my agenda. Eleanor knew a good thing when she saw one. No responsibilities, lots of money—so she grabbed him."

"No children in this marriage?"

"Perish the thought. Children, my dear, they're such a *nuisance.* And having them is so *messy.*"

He was laughing without making a sound. "And worse than that, my dear, I'm told it actually *hurts.* Rachel, it's none of my business but I think you have a problem."

"Mrs. Lockyer? Don't I know it."

"I wasn't thinking of that. From what you said it's quite obvious that Jason Lockyer disappeared because he wanted to disappear. If he intended his wife to know about it he'd have told her. So now you're trying to go against what he wanted, just to please her. Doesn't that give you fits?"

"Tom, she's my *client.*"

"So drop her, my dear."

"Right. And find at the end of the month I can't pay the rent. I'm in a funny business, Tom. Some of my clients are people you'd cross the street to avoid meeting. And I won't even touch the worst cases, the bitter divorce settlements and the child abusers. But the nice, normal people of the world don't seem to have much need for detectives."

There was a conscience inside all that fat, because after a moment he shook his head and said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that, it's not my business."

"No, and it never will be. Know why, Tom? Because you're *rich.*" I was angry but most of it was guilt. He was right; I shouldn't be hounding Jason Lockyer just to please Eleanor Lockyer. "You don't have the same pressures on you. I saw your face when I offered you three hundred and fifty dollars a day to work on this. A lousy three-fifty, you thought, that isn't worth bothering with. Why do you run that stamp store at all if you don't need money? Why don't you do something *important?*"

There must be a branch of etiquette that says you don't harangue near-strangers; but poor Tom Walton didn't feel like a stranger, so I unloaded on him.

After a few moments he sighed. "All right, all right. I'll help you look for Jason Lockyer. And why do I run the stamp store? I'll tell you, I do

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it to *avoid* conversations like this—with my own damned family. They're all over-achievers, and they went on at me for years, telling me to go out and change the world—run for public office, or buy a position on the New York Stock Exchange, or win a Nobel Prize." His voice was becoming steadily louder. "I don't want to do *any* of those things. I want a nice, peaceful life, looking at interesting things. And no one else is willing to let me do that! That's one nice thing about stamps. The family accepts that I'm running a business, they stay away and the stamps don't *harass* you."

That was the moment when I began to revise my opinion of Tom Walton. I had neatly pegged him as a pleasant, shy, introverted, and slightly kooky young man, preferring stamps to people, silence to speeches, and solitude to most types of company. I didn't think he knew how to shout. Now I saw another side of him, stronger and more determined. Anyone who got between Tom and what he wanted was in for a tough time.

Maria had heard the noise from another room of the apartment—she could have heard it from *any* room, and maybe out in the street. She appeared at the door and politely asked us if we were ready to leave. We were. Both of us became subdued. Thomas Walton Shellstock (the Fourth) drove me back to my apartment on Connecticut Avenue. We didn't speak.

As he stopped in front of the building he said: "I hate all this, Rachel. Really hate it. I'm not interested in looking for Jason Lockyer, and if I see his wife ever again that will be too soon."

I reached over and switched off the ignition key. "I know how you must feel," I said. "But I hope you'll decide to stick with it. It would be easy for you to say to hell with it, and quit. I feel the same way myself, but you know I can't do that. For one thing I need the money, and for another I could get a complaint that will cost me my license. And I need your help on this—you can see I'm floundering. Please, Tom. Don't back out now."

It was unfair pressure, and I knew it. After a couple of silent moments Tom lifted his head to look up at the front of the building.

"Oh, hell," he said. "If you want to, bring that lousy golliwog stamp around to my store tomorrow morning."

(Looking back, I see this as the critical moment when I began to use Tom Walton's essential niceness to ease him out of his shell. And if it was also the first step in saving or destroying the world, that's another matter—I certainly didn't suspect it at the time.)

I opened the door and stepped out. "Thanks, Tom," I said. "You're a real nice guy and I won't forget this. See you about ten o'clock. Goodnight."

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I walked away quickly. I wanted to be inside the lobby before he could tell me he had changed his mind.

I had taken the liberty of carrying Jason Lockyer's newly-arrived mail away in my purse from the Lockyer apartment. After all, Eleanor had just about ordered me to take it away and study it.

After two coffees and that conversation with Tom Walton I knew it was going to be difficult to go to sleep (yes, I have a conscience, too). I didn't even try. I spread out the mail on the kitchen table and began to go through it piece by piece. About half-past eleven I had a breakthrough, courtesy of the U.S. Postal Service. It's rare to thank the USPS for slow service, but I was ready to do it.

Although the letters had all been delivered to Lockyer's apartment that morning or the day before, one of them had been *mailed* nearly three weeks earlier. It should have reached Jason Lockyer long before he left for parts unknown, but of course it hadn't.

It bore a first-class postage stamp and a near-illegible postmark. I could make out the date and the letters "CO"—Colorado—at the bottom, but the town name was impossible. The handwritten envelope was addressed to Professor Jason Lockyer. Inside was a second envelope, this time with nothing written on it—but there was a golliwog stamp in the upper right corner. And inside *that* was the following typed message:

I think it's time to give you another progress report, even though it's sooner than I said. Seven and Eight are running along so-so, nothing much different from what you heard about in my last report. But Nine—you'd never believe Nine if you didn't see it for yourself. It's still changing, and no one can estimate an end-point. The crew are supposed to go inside in another week. Marcia says we'll be in no danger and she wants us to stay there longer than usual. She's done something new on the DNA splicing, and she believes that Nine is moving to a totally different limit, one with a Strange Attractor we've never seen before. She thinks it may be the one we've been searching for all along. Me, I'm afraid it may be the ultimate boss system—the real Mega-Mother. Certainly the efficiency of energy utilization is fantastic—more than double any of the others, and still increasing.

I tell you frankly, I'm scared, but I'll have to go in there. No way out of it. You told me that if I ever wanted advice you'd give it. I think that's what we all need here, a new look without any publicity. Any chance you can arrange to come? I'll write again or telephone in the next few days to keep you up-to-date. Then maybe you can tell me it's all my imagination.

The one-page letter was unsigned and undated, but I had the date on the postmark. And I had the log of Jason Lockyer's incoming long-dis-

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tance phone calls at the university and at each apartment. It should be straightforward to find out who had written the cryptic note.

By half-past one I had changed my ideas about that. The incoming log showed nothing from Colorado anywhere near the right dates. As a final act of desperation I at last went to the log of Jason Lockyer's outgoing calls, ones he had placed himself. I had looked at this log before, but he made so many calls to so many places that I had not been able to see anything significant.

Sweet success.

It jumped out at me in the first ten seconds of looking. Six days after this letter had been mailed, Lockyer had placed a series of four phone calls in one day to Nathrop, Colorado. One call had lasted for over forty minutes. I checked in my National Geographic atlas. Nathrop was a small town about seventy miles west of Colorado Springs. It lay on the Arkansas River with the Sawatch Range of the High Rockies rearing up to over fourteen thousand feet just to the west.

Nathrop, Colorado.

For the first time, I had a place to look for Jason Lockyer that was smaller than the continental United States.

Within two minutes I knew I would be going to Nathrop myself. Calling that telephone number was a tempting thought, but there was a danger that it might make Jason Lockyer run before I had a chance to talk to him face to face. The real question was, would I tell Eleanor Lockyer what I was doing? She was my client, so the natural answer was, yes, she had to know and approve. But now I had to face Tom's question: did I *want* to find Jason Lockyer for her when he didn't want to be found?

I went to bed. I spent the rest of the night tossing and turning in mixed feelings of satisfaction and uneasiness.

I was standing at the door of Tom's shop on 15th Street by eight-thirty. Nice district. I was propositioned twice, and would have been moved on, too, if I hadn't been able to show the cops my license.

Tom's white Dodge wheezed around the corner at nine o'clock. He saw me and waved before he turned to park in the alley behind the building. He was eating an Egg McMuffin. I'm not a breakfast person, but I wished I had one.

"Got the stamp?" he said as soon as he came out of the alley. He was wearing a tan sports coat and matching flannels, and a well-ironed white shirt. His hair was combed and he was so clean-shaven his skin had a scraped look.

"Better than that. I have two of them."

I explained while he was opening the front door of the store.

"Good," he said. "It's nice to have a spare. It means I won't have to be

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quite so c-careful with the first one. And if you want my opinion, you ought to find Jason Lockyer and hear his side of the story before you tell Eleanor Lockyer a damned thing."

He went straight past the counter, unlocked the inner door, and waved me through.

It was just as well that I had learned the previous night that Tom was from a wealthy family. Otherwise, the word that would have entered my head when I stepped through the beige-painted wooden door into the rear of the store would have been: *drugs*. Money had been spent here, lots of money, and in downtown D.C. big money says illegal drugs more often than you would believe. At the back of the store was a massive Mosler safe, the sort of thing you'd normally see in a top-secret security installation or a bank vault. There was a well-equipped optical table along one wall and a mass of computer gear along another. Tom explained to me that it was an Apollo image analysis workstation, with a digitizer and raster scanner as input devices.

"I can view a stamp or a marking ink with a dozen different visible wavelength filters," he said. "Or in ultraviolet or multiband infrared. We can do chemical tests, too, on a tiny corner, so small you'd never know we'd touched it. I have verniers that will measure to a micron or better, and the raster scanner will create a digital image for computer processing. I can do computer matching against all the standard papers and inks."

"And the safe?"

"Stamps. They're negotiable currency, of course, but that's not the point. The old and rare ones have a worth quite unrelated to their face value."

Just like Tom Walton.

He took the envelope containing the first golliwog stamp and placed it carefully on a light-table. Those fat fingers were surprisingly precise and delicate. As he placed a high-powered stereo lens in position and bent over it, he said: "Why are you rejecting the most obvious reason of all for Jason Lockyer running off—that he c-can't stand his wife? Seems to me he has an excellent reason, right there."

"If he just wanted to get away from her he wouldn't need to disappear. He had good legal advice before they married. They have a marriage contract, and if they split up he knows exactly how much it would cost him. He can afford it. All he would have to do is stay over in Baltimore and tell his lawyers to go ahead with the separation papers. If he were to die, that's another matter. She gets a lot more. I think that's one reason why Eleanor is willing to pay me to find out what happened. She wants that money so bad she can taste it."

I watched as Tom grunted in satisfaction and straightened up. He fed

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the second envelope carefully into a machine that looked like a horizontal toaster.

"The thousand dollar version of the old steam kettle," he said. "It takes the stamp off the cover with minimal damage to the mucilage. Here it comes." The stamp was appearing from the other side of the machine on a little porcelain tray. He removed it, placed it between two pieces of transparent film, and secured it in position on the scanner.

"There's one other reason why I'm sure Lockyer's not planning to stay away forever," I went on. "He didn't take any check books, and he hasn't used any credit cards. What will he do when he runs out of money?"

"What about coupon clipping?" asked Tom. And then, when I looked puzzled, "I mean dividends. If he's like me he gets dividend checks all the time, and he can cash them easily. All he would have to do is change the mailing address for receipt of those, and he could live off them indefinitely."

"Damn. I never thought of that. I'll have to check it."

He closed the cover on the scanner, leaned back, and stared at me. "It's none of my business, but how did you get into this detective work? And how long have you been doing it?"

"Six years. Two years on my own, since my uncle died. It was really his business, and I used to help him out in the summers when I was still in school. When I graduated a job was hard to find. Tell an employer you have a double degree in English and psychology and it's like saying you have AIDS and leprosy."

"But why do you *stay* in it?"

"Well, I've got an investment. There's a hundred and fifty-eight dollar fee for the application for a D.C. license. And another sixteen-fifty for fingerprinting, and thirty for business cards. It adds up."

I was trying to tease him, but he was too smart and it didn't work.

"Do you make any money?" he asked.

He wasn't teasing at all, he was just making conversation while the scanner did its thing on the stamp. But unfortunately it *did* work. I've grown hypersensitive about what I do for a living. I broke up with my last boyfriend, Larry, over just this subject.

"I pay the rent," I snapped back at him. "And I bought your dinner last night. You say you're rich but I didn't see you itching to pick up the tab."

"I've been trained not to," he said quietly. "That's one of the things I was told at my mother's knee—everyone in the world will try to soak you for a loan or a f-free meal, as soon as they find out you're a Shellstock. I guess that's another reason why I'm Tom Walton. But I'll buy you dinner anytime you want to, Rachel."

Which of course left me feeling like the ultimate jerk. I hadn't bought

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him dinner—the Lockyers had, since it would be on my expense account. And he knew that, yet he offered to buy me dinner out of his own pocket. I'd slapped him and he was offering the other cheek.

"Let me tell you about the golliwog stamp," he went on. I was quite ready to let him change the subject. "There's more to be measured, but a few things are obvious already. First, look at the perforations on the edge of the stamp. Even without a lens you can see that only the top and bottom are perforated, with the sides clean. That means this stamp is from a vertical coil—a roll of stamps rather than a sheet, with the stamps joined at top and bottom, not at the sides. And even without measuring I can tell you this is 'perf 12'—twelve perforations in twenty millimeters. Nothing unusual about any of this, though horizontal coils are more common. What's more interesting is the way the stamp was produced. Take a look."

He moved me to the light-table and showed me how to adjust the binocular lens to suit my eyes.

"See the pattern of lines across the stamp? That's called a *laid batonné* paper, a woven paper with heavier lines in a certain direction. And there's no watermark—that's a pretty sure sign that these stamps were never intended for use as commercial postage."

"So what's the point of them?"

"My guess is that they were made to identify a certain group of people—like a secret sign, or a password. Put one of these on the envelope, you see, and it proves you're one of the inside group. I've seen it done before, though this is an unusually well-executed design for that sort of thing. The choice of a golliwog supports my idea because it's not a symbol I'd ever expect to see on a commercial stamp. Now, look at the actual design of the golliwog."

I stared at it and waited for revelation.

"There are five main processes used in manufacturing stamps," he went on. "First, engraved *intaglio,* where a design is cut directly into the surface of the plate—that's been used for as long as stamps have been made. Second, letterpress, in which the design is a *cameo,* a pattern raised in relief above the surface of the plate. Third, *lithography,* which uses water and an oily ink drawn on a stone, or actually on a metal surface prepared to simulate stone. Fourth, *embossed,* where a die is used to give the stamp a raised surface. Fifth, *photogravure,* where the lines are photographed onto a film covering the plate, and then etched onto the surface as though they were an engraving. Clearly, what you are looking at there is a photogravure."

Clearly. To him, perhaps. "I'll believe you. But I don't see where that takes us." I was losing interest in stamps and itching to head off for

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Colorado. I didn't have the gall to tell him, though, not when he thought what he was doing was important.

"It takes us to a very definite place." All signs of stammer had gone from Tom's voice. "To Philadelphia. You see, there aren't all that many people who do the design work for stamps. And I'm ninety-five percent sure I recognize the designer of that one you're looking at. I know his style. He likes vertical coils, and he likes to do intaglio photogravure. His name is Raymond Sines, and if you want me to I'll call Ray right now."

Why hadn't he told me that to start with, instead of giving me the rigmarole about *intaglio* and *cameo?* Because he liked to talk about stamps, that's why.

I stopped pretending to look at the golliwog. "I'm not sure what talking to Raymond Sines would do for me. How well do you know him?"

He hesitated. I was learning. Hesitation in Tom Walton usually meant uneasiness.

"So-so. I've met Ray a few times informally, at the Collectors' Club in New York City. He's a pretty peculiar guy. Very smart, and a terrific artist and designer. But when he gets away from stamps he's a one-subject talker. He's a space-nut, and a founder member of Ascend Forever—a group that designs space habitats."

"I don't see that taking us to Jason Lockyer. Do you realize that yesterday I had no leads and now I have two? And they go off in wildly different directions."

"Two's a lot better than zero. And I think you may need them both."

I saw his point. Nathrop showed a population of less than five hundred people, so if Lockyer was there I couldn't miss him; but it was also a wilderness area with hundreds of square miles of land and very few people. So if he *wasn't* in the town . . .

"I'm afraid you're right," I said. "It could be that whoever wrote the letter to Lockyer was just using the Nathrop post office mail-box and telephone. What do we do if we go there and find nothing?"

"We come back. Do you have the letter with you? If so, I'd like to see it for myself."

I handed it over and watched while he read it. "Make any sense to you?"

He shook his head. "Strange Attractor?"

"I know. I've never heard the phrase before."

"I have. I can tell you what it means at the *Scientific American* level. It's a math-physics thing, where you keep feeding the output of a system back in as a new input. Sometimes it converges to a steady state—an attractor; sometimes it goes wild, and ends up unstable or with total chaos; and sometimes it sort of wanders around a region—around a

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strange attractor. The type of behavior depends on some critical system variable, like flow rate or chemical concentration or temperature. It's obvious from this letter that the writer is involved in a set of experiments—but it's anybody's guess as to what field they're in. And *Mega-Mother?"* He placed the letter back on the light-table. "Maybe he's using 'Strange Attractor' to mean something different from what I've seen before. I don't think we're going to get much out of this."

"I'm not, that's for sure. And it's irrelevant. I'm trying to find Jason Lockyer, not solve puzzles. Useless or not, I guess I have to head for Colorado."

"Will you hold off for one day—so I can make a quick run up to Philly. Ray Sines has his own engraving shop there and I want to drop in on him."

"What do you think he can tell you?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be going." Tom took a blank envelope over to the typewriter next to the safe and typed his own name on it. Then he removed the golliwog stamp from the scanner, placed a thin layer of gum on the back of it, and carefully stuck it on the envelope. Finally he placed the letter from Colorado inside it. "I'll call Ray now and tell him I'm interested in tracing works by an early American engraver. That's quite true, and he's bound to be interested. And during the meeting I want him to catch a look at this." He held up the envelope. "And we'll t-take it from there."

I had expected Eleanor Lockyer to quiz me about my proposed travel and give me a general hard time. Instead she was sweet and reasonable, and didn't ask me one question about where I was going, or why.

"Tell Thomas that the invitation is in the mail," she said. "It will be just a small, intimate group, no more than a dozen."

"I'll tell him." (I didn't.)

He wanted to drive to Philadelphia in the Dodge death-trap. I talked him out of it by suggesting that if we went by train we could fly straight to Denver after our meeting with Sines. Tom seemed surprised that I wanted to go with him, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Just don't say too much about stamps or engraving," he said.

The least of my worries.

Ray Sines was younger than I had expected, a thin, red-faced man of about thirty who suffered premature baldness. He was attempting the disastrous trick of training the remaining strands of hair to a pattern that covered his whole head, and every couple of minutes he ran his hand in a circular motion around his scalp. The top of his head looked like a rotary shoe-polisher. His office, above an industrial warehouse, reminded

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me of Tom's store, dusty and shabby and somehow irrelevant to what went on there.

He showed pleasure and no surprise at our visit, and he and Tom went off at once into their polite sarabande of talk about Gibbons and Scott and Minkus catalogs, the location of the printing equipment of the legendary Jacob Perkins of Massachusetts, and the newly-discovered stamps of the 1842 City Despatch Post of New York City. I sat on the edge of my chair, drank four cups of coffee that I would later regret, and itched for Tom to get to the real business.

After about an hour and a half I realized the dreadful truth: he wasn't going to do it. The envelope and the golliwog stamp were there in Tom's case, standing by his leg—and they were going to stay there. He had had no trouble devising a theoretical plan to startle information out of Ray Sines, but when it came to the act he couldn't bring himself to begin.

Finally I reached down, hoisted the case, and placed it on Tom's lap. "The catalog. Don't you have a catalog in here that you want to show Mr. Sines?"

Tom glared at me, but he was stuck. He opened the case and peered inside. "I don't know if I remembered to bring it," he said. While Sines looked on he lifted out a layer of papers and placed them on the low table in front of us. On top was the envelope addressed to him, with its prominent golliwog stamp.

Sines stared at it and his face lit up. "I didn't know you were a member!" he said to Tom. Then he gave me a quick and nervous look.

"Yes," Tom started to say. "Both of us—"

"Member of what?" I rapped at Sines. If this were a secret organization any self-respecting member would check a stranger's credentials before admitting its existence.

For answer, Sines reached behind him and produced a whole roll of golliwog stamps. "My design," he said proudly. "I worked harder on this than on any commercial assignment. It's all right, you can talk to me. I was one of the first people that Marcia allowed in. When did you join?"

Tom looked at me beseechingly.

"I came in about four months ago," I said. "Tom's a recent acquisition, he joined just a month back."

"Terrific!" Sines leaned back in his chair and beamed at both of us. "If you haven't been out to the site already, there's a real treat in store for you."

I reached into my purse and waved our airline tickets at him. "We're on our way there now. Maybe you can tell us, what's the best way once we arrive at the airport?"

He frowned at me. "Isn't someone meeting you?"

We were moving onto tricky ground. I had an urge to get out quickly,

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but we needed information. "Everyone has their hands full," I said. "There seem to be problems with one of the systems—Seven, is it?"

"No, it's Nine." He relaxed again. "Yes, I hear it's still doing funny things. We'll get the right one eventually. Where are you flying to?"

"Denver."

"Pity. You should have flown to Colorado Springs. Either way, though, you'll have some pretty high driving ahead of you. Take Route 285 out of Denver until you meet Route 24 into Buena Vista. Go north from there and you should see the site on your left, up on the slopes of Mount Harvard."

"How far from Nathrop?" I asked.

"A few miles. But if you get there, you've gone the wrong way out of Buena Vista. Pretty good steak restaurant, though, if you do make the wrong turn." He frowned. "If you would like me to call ahead and try to arrange—"

"No. Please don't." I took Tom's arm and stood up. "We'd hate to make a nuisance of ourselves before we even arrive. And we'd better go now, our plane leaves in an hour and a half."

"You'll need a cab." He stood up, too. "I just wish I was going with you. Give me a call when you get back, tell me what you think of things out there. For me, it's the most exciting thing that's happened in my whole life."

He escorted us to the entrance of the building. "Ascend forever!" he said as we left, and raised his arm.

"Ascend forever!" I replied, but Tom said nothing. As soon as Sines was out of sight and sound he exploded at me. "I hate that sort of thing!"

"You think I enjoy it?" I had the caffeine shakes and I needed to go to the bathroom. "I know we lied to him, but what did you want me to do? Break down and explain to Sines that we went there to trick him?"

He didn't reply. But I suspected that it was not the lying that had him upset. It was me, pushing the attache case at him, pushing him to do something alien to his temperament. He'd never believe me, but I was as upset about that as he was.

Denver's Stapleton Airport is at five thousand feet; our drive south and west took us steadily higher. Within the hour we were up over nine thousand, with snow-capped mountains filling the sky ahead. I had never been to Colorado before and the scenery bowled me over—magnificent country, like moving to a different planet after the rampant azaleas and dogwoods of May in Washington.

Tom was less impressed. He had been here before—"skiing in Vail and Aspen, while I tried to persuade the family that they weren't doing me

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any favors by sending me. I finally managed to break a leg, and that did it."

On the plane and again in the car we beat to death what we learned from Ray Sines, and what we knew or surmised about its relevance to Jason Lockyer's disappearance.

"Ascend Forever is in the middle of this," said Tom. "Or perhaps it's a subgroup of them. More likely that, because they're going through a procedure to keep it a big secret, and that's quite impossible with too many participants."

"A pretty childish procedure, don't you think? I haven't run across special stamps and secret symbols and hidden messages since I was in high school."

"You'd never make a Freemason. And I knew a bunch of people at Princeton who were still into private codes. Let's go on. They have some project—"

"—a group of projects. Remember Seven, Eight, and Nine. Which also means there's probably a One through Six—"

"—Okay, at least nine projects, but they're probably all doing similar things. There is some sort of development activity associated with them and it's out in the Colorado mountains, west of Nathrop and Buena Vista. It's pretty big, visible from a fair distance. And it's in some sort of trouble—"

"—or part of it is. Remember, Seven and Eight are doing fine. It's Nine that's off, enough to want Jason Lockyer to come out and take a look at what's going on."

"And he's a famous biologist. But the projects have something to do with strange attractors. Not to mention the old Mega-Mother." Tom shrugged. "You're the detective. Can you put it together?"

"Not a clue. Unless Jason Lockyer has other talents, and the group are calling on those to help them."

Grasping at straws. We both knew it and after a while we dropped it in favor of general chat. We uncovered a total of three common acquaintances, not counting Jill Fahnestock, and we agreed that except for Jill we liked none of them. He found out, to his horror, that the purple mark on my left forearm was the scar of a bullet-wound, inflicted when a man I approached in a child custody case fired at me without warning. ("Cocaine," I said. "He was carrying eight ounces of it, nothing to do with child custody. I was just unlucky—or lucky, depending on your point of view.") I found out, with equal horror, that Tom carried no health insurance of any kind and did not propose to get any. ("Health insurance is for people who don't have money. Obviously, it costs more on average to buy insurance than it does to be sick—otherwise, how could insurance companies stay in business. Health insurance is a bourgeois concept,

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Rachel." That last sentence was to annoy me, but this time I handled it better.)

He ate when he was happy. So did I. The fact that he was forty pounds overweight while I was too thin to please anyone but a clothes designer was lost on neither of us.

Eventually we stopped talking and simply sat in companionable silence. Tom was one of those people whose presence you can enjoy without speaking.

Buena Vista came finally into view, a town that couldn't be more than a couple of thousand people. For the past half hour we had scanned the mountains ahead of us for any anomalies, and seen nothing even though it was a glittering spring day and visibility was perfect.

I had been driving, because we were renting a Toyota Celica, and since I was considering buying one I wanted to see how it handled. When we reached Buena Vista I stopped the car at what looked like a general purpose store on the main through street.

"You need to buy something?" said Tom.

"Information. Want to come in with me?"

The bored youth behind the counter knew instantly what I was talking about. "The Observatory, you mean," he said. "You can see it from the road, but you have to look hard. Take the road north and look for a gravel cut off to the left. That goes all the way on up, you can't miss it." He stared at us. "You'll be working there?"

"No. Just visiting."

"Ah. They say they're making a spaceship up there, one that's going off to the end of the universe."

"I don't know about that. We'll see." I bought two cans of Coke and we left.

"So much for the big secret," Tom said when we were back in the car. "They're practically running guided tours."

"If you want to hide something, disguise it as something else that local people don't much care about—like an observatory."

Tom up-ended his can of Coke. He inhaled it more than drank it, in one long gulp. "What about the spaceship?"

"Safe enough. No one in their right mind would believe it."

We had a major decision to make as we drove up the winding gravel-covered road. Would we barrel on up to the entrance, or would we leave the car and play Indian Scout?

We discussed it for another minute, then compromised. A complex of buildings stood on the south-facing slope of the mountainside. We parked the car three-quarters of a mile away, where the top of the blue Toyota would barely be visible over the top of the final ridge. I led the way as we walked until we had a good view. The location was well above ten

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thousand feet, and three minutes walk up the slight incline left us gasping.

There were five major structures ahead. Three of them were large, hemispherical, geodesic domes, made of glass or plastic. Two of those were transparent, and we could see shadows inside where trees or shrubs seemed to be growing marked off by triangular support ribbing of painted metal or yellow plastic. The third dome was apparently of tinted material, and its wall panels gleamed dull orange-red. The three domes stood in roughly an equilateral triangle, each one sixty feet across, and at the center of that triangle were two more conventional buildings. They were white and square-sided, with the look of prefabricated or temporary structures. I counted seven cars parked outside the larger one.

A stiff breeze blew from the west, and even in the bright sunlight it was too cold to stand and watch for more than a few minutes. In that time no one appeared from any of the buildings or domes, nor was there evidence of activity within.

We went back to the car and sat inside. I put my hand on my stomach. The Coke had been a mistake. I had the jitters and a pain that ran from my solar plexus around the lower right-hand side of my ribs.

"What now?" said Tom. He looked like the detective, calm and confident. His question probably meant he had made up his mind what we ought to do.

I burped, in as ladylike a way as I could manage. "If Jason Lockyer is inside one of those buildings it won't do us any good to sit here. And if Jason Lockyer's *not* inside, and he's a thousand or two thousand miles away, it still won't do us any good to sit here."

"My thoughts exactly." It was his turn to reach out and turn a car's ignition key. "Let's do it, Rachel. Let's go up there and take the golliwog by the horns."

I eased up the slope at a sedate twenty miles an hour, all my attention on the road. Halfway there, Tom said, "Hold on a minute. Is something wrong with my eyes?"

I stopped the car. It took a few moments, then I saw it, too. The orange-red dome had changed color to a darker, muddier tone, with rising streaks of deep purple within it. Tom and I looked at each other.

"We'll never find out from here," I said. I let in the clutch—badly—and we jerked forward again. We crept all the way up to the larger building and parked in the line of cars. I did an automatic inventory. A new Buick, two old Mustangs, a Camaro that had been in an accident and needed body-work, two VW Rabbits, and an ancient Plymouth that made even Tom's car look fresh off the assembly line. The same sort of mix as I might expect to see in a Washington car park, but with a bit more Buy-American. The air was clear, the sunlight blinding, and there was not

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a sound to be heard. Living in the city you forget how quiet real quiet can be. We walked over to the building—aluminum-sided, I now saw—almost on tiptoe. My pulse rate was up in the hundreds, and I could feel it in my ears, the loudest sound in the world.

"Inside?" whispered Tom.

I nodded and he led the way. The front door was closed but not locked. It opened to a big lobby about twenty feet square, spotlessly clean and containing nothing but half a dozen metal-frame chairs. As we paused I heard a clatter of footsteps on the aluminum floor, and a man carrying a couple of thick notebooks came hurrying in. Tom and I froze.

"Well, thank Heaven," the new arrival said. "I didn't know anyone was coming out. We've been so short-handed this last week I've been on continuous double shifts."

New York accent, California tan. He was no more than twenty-two or twenty-three, and he was wearing an all-white uniform like a medical orderly. The first impression was of a clean-cut, clean-living lad who should have been carrying an apple for his teacher along with his notebooks. A closer look added something different. He had a spaced-out glassy stare in his eyes, a look that I had seen before only among the ranks of the Moonies and the Hare Krishnas.

"First visit?" he said.

Tom and I nodded. I hope I looked as casual and at ease as he did.

"Great. You'll love it here. I'm Scott."

"Rachel," I said. As I took his outstretched hand the inside of my head made its own swirling list of mysteries: vanished professor—golliwog stamp roll—observatory—spaceship—biology experiment—strange attractor—religion—sanctuary—lunatic asylum.

What was I missing?

"I'll tell Marcia you're here." Scott had shaken hands with Tom and was heading off along a passageway. "But let's settle you in first, and then find something for you to do."

We followed him to a long room with a dozen beds and a shower and toilet facility at the far end. "You'll sleep in here," Scott said. "Make yourselves comfortable. I'll be back in five minutes."

I sat down shakily on one of the beds. Hard as a rock. "Prison? Military barracks? Hospital? Tom, we were crazy to come here."

"Don't you want to find Lockyer?" Tom shook his head. "Not prison, not hospital. Boy Scouts, or the dorm in Vermont summer camp. Kids away from home for a big adventure, mummy and daddy miles away. But they've gone unisex."

"What *is* this place?"

"I don't know. Sounds like Marcia's the kingpin, whoever she is. Or queenpin. Or camp counselor. Everyone defers to her, even Ray Sines."

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He went across to the window and stood gazing out of it. "My imagination, or is it changing again?"

I followed his pointing finger. The third dome was now a mottled and virulent green. A flowing column of darker color seemed to be rising steadily through the paint on the dome. Before we could discuss what we were seeing Scott came hurrying back in.

"Right," he said. "A quick look around, then introductions will have to wait until tonight. We'll need uniforms."

He led us to an array of tall lockers at the end of the room. While he watched—no thoughts of privacy here—Tom and I took off our outer garments and replaced them with aseptic-looking white uniforms identical to the one that Scott was wearing. Tom had a little trouble finding one that fitted him; the members of Ascend Forever were presumably an undernourished group.

When we were dressed to Scott's satisfaction he took us to the entrance hall—and back outside the building. Tom gave me a quick glance. Why bother with sterile clothing if we were going to be outside? Answer: sterility was not the point; uniformity was.

We marched to one of the three domes and peered in through the transparent wall panels. I saw a sloping floor with a little fountain at the upper end, close to where we were standing. A trickle of water ran across the dome's interior and vanished at the other side. The rest of the floor was covered with dusty-looking plants, growing half-heartedly in a light-colored soil. The plants looked tired, and slightly wilted. In the center of the floor stood the skeleton of a much smaller dome, with only half its walls paneled, and within that structure three human figures were bending over what looked like a computer console.

A telephone handset hung on the outside of the dome, and Scott reached for it. "New arrivals," he said. "Any changes?"

The three figures inside straightened to stare out at us and waved a greeting. "Welcome aboard." The voice on the phone was young, friendly, and enthusiastic. "Nothing special happening here. We've been trying to find out what's wiping out the legumes, but we don't have an answer. Oxygen and nitrogen down a little bit more—still decreasing."

"Still trying changed illumination?"

"Just finished it. We're putting in a bit less power from the ceiling lights, we're making it longer wavelength. We won't know how it works for a while."

"No danger, though?"

"Not yet. No matter what, we'll have another couple of weeks before we begin to worry. But it's a pain to see it go this way. Three weeks ago we were pretty sure this one would make it."

"Maybe it will." Scott waved to the people inside. "We'll keep trying,

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too. Now that I have some help maybe I'll have time to run an independent analysis."

He hung the handset back on its closed stand and pointed to the panel next to it. "This is all new," he said. "And a real improvement. We have dual controls now, inside and outside. Temperature and humidity and lighting levels in the dome can be controlled from this panel here. When we started out, all the controls were inside and it was a real nuisance. If there was no crew we had to send someone through the airlock whenever we wanted to vary the interior environmental conditions."

He started towards the middle of the complex. "Anyway, that's Eight," he said as we walked. "Not going too good now. Seven is a lot better."

"What happened to One through Six?" asked Tom.

"They went to stable end-forms, but they weren't ones that humans could live in. So we brought the crews back outside, closed down the operations, and re-used the domes."

He didn't notice Tom's raised eyebrows, and went on, "But Nine's the interesting one! I'll warn you now, though, you won't see much of the inside of it from here. We've had to ship a TV camera to the interior, to supplement the audio descriptions, otherwise we'd be short of data. But we'll take a look through the panels, anyway."

We were closing on the strangest of the domes, and now I could see that its wall panels were neither painted nor made of opaque materials. They were coated on the inside. Scott went to a telephone set in the wall—in that respect this was identical to the other dome.

"Marcia?" he said. "New arrivals. How about clearing a patch, so we can take a look inside Nine?"

The coating of the wall panels was close in color to the way we had first seen it, an orange-red with a touch of brown. While we stood and watched, a circular cleared patch began to appear on the wall panel closest to us. Soon we could see a hand holding a plastic scraper.

"Tough coating," said a woman's voice. "A good deal tougher than yesterday."

The clear patch was finished and about a foot across. In the middle of that patch a frowning black face suddenly appeared. It was that of a woman, with protruding eyes and black straight hair that stuck out wildly in all directions.

We hadn't found Jason Lockyer; but we had found the inspiration for the design of the golliwog stamp.

"New arrivals," said Scott again. The tone of his voice was quite different from the way it had been at the other dome. Now he was respectful and subdued, almost fearful.

This time there was no cheery wave. The golliwog face stared hard at me and Tom. "What chapter?" said a gruff voice through the handset.

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We had no choice.

"Philadelphia," I said.

"Your names?"

"Rachel Banks and Tom Walton."

The way to the car was around the dome and then dead ahead. We could be in it in thirty seconds and driving down the mountain. On the other hand, Scott was acclimatized to ten thousand feet and we were not. I couldn't run more than fifty yards without stopping for breath, and overweight Tom was sure to be in worse shape . . .

While those thoughts were running through my head the face on the other side of the panel had disappeared. We stood there for about thirty seconds, while my instinct to run became stronger and stronger. I was all ready to shout at Tom to make a break for it when Marcia's face appeared again at the panel. Already the wall was partly coated, and she had to use the scraper again to clear it.

"I've told all the chapters," she said. "I have to approve any new members *in advance* of joining—and certainly in advance of being sent here. We must check on you two. And while that's being done we can't afford any risks. Building Two, Scott. You're responsible for them."

There was no doubt who was in charge. And I had waited too long. I half-turned, and found that Marcia had used her brief absence to call for reinforcements. Four men were on their way over to the dome, all young and tanned and fit-looking.

Tom looked to me for direction. I shook my head. Marcia's check on us was going to show that we were not members of whatever group she led, we could be sure of that. But this was not the time or place to look for an escape. I suddenly realized something I should have been aware of minutes ago: the car keys were in my purse—and my purse was back at the lockers with the rest of my clothes. Thank God I hadn't told Tom to run for it. I would have felt like the world's prize idiot, sitting inside the car while our pursuers came closer and I explained to him that I had no way to start the engine.

We were escorted, very politely, to the second and smaller of the two white buildings. I noticed for the first time that it had no windows.

"This is just part of the standard procedure," said Scott. He was embarrassed. "I know everything will be all right. I'll check as soon as I can with the group leader in Philadelphia, and then I'll come and let you out. Help yourself to any food you want from the refrigerator."

The door was thick and made of braced aluminum. It closed behind us. And locked.

We were standing in a room with three beds, a kitchen, and one other door. Tom went across to it.

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"Locked," he said after a moment. "But padlocked on *this* side. Where do you think it leads?"

"Not outside, that's for sure. Probably upstairs. It wouldn't help, though—there are no windows there, either." I went across to the refrigerator and found a carton of milk. I had savage heartburn and what I would have really liked was a Mylanta tablet, but they were also in my purse. I was proving to be quite a klutz of a detective.

Tom was still over at the door. "It's wood, not aluminum. And nowhere near as strong as the one that leads outside."

"Good. Can you break the damned thing open?"

"Break it!" He stared at me in horror. "Rachel, this is someone's private property."

"It sure as hell is. Tom, I know you were brought up to regard personal property as sacred. But we're in a fix. That bloody golliwog woman is all ready to serve us on the half-shell, and I don't give a shit about property. Break it." I was drinking from the carton—most unhygienic, but I was past caring. "Whatever they plan to do with us, I doubt if adding a broken door to the list of crimes will make much difference. Have fun. Smash away."

"Well, if you really think we have to." Tom was still hesitating. "All right, I'll do it. With luck I won't need to do any actual smashing."

He wandered over to the kitchen area of the room and found a blunt knife. The door's padlock was held in position by four wood screws. It took him only three or four minutes to remove all of them. He swung the door open and we found we were looking at the foot of a tightly spiraling staircase.

"We can't get out this way," I said. "But there's nothing better to do. Let's take a look."

He went up the stairs in front of me, clutching the central support pole. On the second floor we came to another door, this one unlocked.

Tom opened it. We were looking at a carbon copy of the room below, but with one important difference. At the table in the kitchen are a sat a man with a loaf of bread and a lump of cheese—Edam, by the look of it—in front of him. Next to those stood a bottle of red wine, and the man facing us had a full glass in his hand and was sniffing at it thoughtfully. When the door opened he looked up in surprise.

I think I was more surprised than he was, though of course I had no right to be. I knew him from his picture. We were looking at Jason Lockyer.

The introductions and explanation of who we were and how we got there took a few minutes.

"And it seems we're all stuck here," I said.

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"Well, there are worse places," said Lockyer. We had set a couple more chairs around the table and were all sitting there. "I ought to apologize, because of course this is all my fault. When I look back I can see I started the whole damned thing."

He was a small, neatly-built man with a good-humored face and the faint residual of a Boston accent. The fact that he was locked up, with no idea what was likely to happen to him next, did nothing to ruin his appetite. His only complaint was the quality of the wine. ("California 'burgundy,' " he said. "It shouldn't be allowed to use the name. It's no excuse to say wine like this is cheap. It ought to be *free.")*

"Three years ago," he went on, "I was invited to give a talk to the local chapter of Ascend Forever in Baltimore. I had no idea what to say to them, until one of my best students—Marcia Seretto—who was also a member of the society, mentioned the society's interest in establishing stand-alone colonies out in space. That would imply a completely stable, totally re-cycling environment. After that it was obvious what I had to talk about.

"Most people know that one fully re-cycling environment, driven only by energy from the sun, already exists. That's the biosphere of the planet Earth. What I pointed out—and what got Marcia so excited that she almost had a fit—was the existence today of other biospheres. They were small, and they only supported life at the microbe level, but they were—and are—genuine miniature ecospheres, relying on nothing but solar energy to keep them going. The first ones were made by Clair Folsome in Hawaii in 1967, and they're still going."

"Small?" I asked. "How small?"

"You sound like Marcia. Small enough to fit in this wine bottle. The original self-sustaining ecospheres lived in one-liter containers."

"That's *small,"* said Tom.

"You also sound like Marcia. *Too* small, she said. But she asked me if it would be possible to design an ecosphere that was big enough for a few humans to live in—and live off, in the sense that it would provide them with food, water, and air—but not much bigger than a house. I told her I didn't see why not, and I even sketched out the way I would go about designing the mix of living organisms to do it. You need something that does photosynthesis, and you need saprophytes that help to decompose complex organic chemicals to simpler forms. But with an adequate energy supply there's no reason why an ecosphere to support humans has to be Earth-sized.

"Marcia graduated, and I thought she had taken a job somewhere on the West Coast. I didn't worry about her, because she was the most charismatic person I had ever met. She seemed able to talk the rest of the students into doing anything. It turned out that I was right, but I

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had underestimated her. The next thing I knew, I had a letter from another one of my students. He wanted to know what end-forms were possible when you started an ecosphere with a given mix of organisms. The answer, of course, is that today's theories are inadequate. No one knows where you'll finish. But it was the first hint I had that something had gone on beyond my lecture. I sent him a reply, and a week later in my In-Box at the university I found a letter with an odd stamp on it, like a caricature of a black-faced doll."

"A golliwog," I said.

"So I learned. I also realized that it looked a lot like Marcia. The letter said that I was the official founding father of the Habitat League. I've seen stuff like that before, silly student jokes. So it didn't worry me. But *then* I began to receive anonymous letters with the same stamp. And when I read those, I began to worry."

"We saw one," I said. "It was sent to you but the mails fouled up the delivery."

"The person who wrote them said that Marcia had set up her own organization within Ascend Forever, with its own chapters and its own sponsors for funding. She had organized a camp in Colorado—this one—and they were following my advice on setting up self-sustaining ecospheres that could be used as a model for space habitats. I replied to him, saying the Colorado mountains were not a bad site, but they weren't the best."

"Why not?"

"Simulated space environment," said Tom, before Lockyer could answer. "If you want to match the spectrum of solar radiation in low earth orbit, you should go as high as you can and as near the equator as you can, where the sunlight is less affected by the atmosphere. Somewhere in the Andes near Quito would be ideal."

"You're a member of the Habitat League?" Lockyer was worried.

"Never heard of them until today. But I've read about space colonies and habitats."

"Then you probably know that you have to do things a lot differently than they're done in the Earth's natural biosphere. For example, the carbon dioxide cycle on Earth, from atmosphere, through plants and animals, and back to the atmosphere, takes eight to ten years. In the ecospheres that I helped to design, that was down to a day or two. And that means other changes—major ones. And *that* means unpredictable behavior of the ecosphere, and no way to know the stable end conditions without trying them. Sometimes the whole ecosphere will damp down to a low level where only microbial life forms can be supported. That happened in the first half dozen attempts out here. And there was always the possibility of a real anomaly, a thriving, stable ecosphere that seemed

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to be heading to an end-point equal in vigor to the Earth biosphere, but grossly different from it."

"Ecosphere Nine?" I said.

"You've got it. That one was first established four months ago, with its own initial mix of macro and micro lifeforms. Almost from the beginning it began to show strange oscillatory behavior—cyclic patterns of development that weren't exactly repeating. It reminded me when I saw it of the life cycle and aggregation patterns of the amoebic slime molds, such as *Dictyostelium discoideum,* though you may be more reminded of the behavior of the Belousov-Zhabotinsky chemical reaction, or of the Oregonator and Brusselator systems. They all have limit cycles around stable attractor conditions."

He must have seen the expression on my face. "Well, let's just say that the behavior of Ecosphere Nine originally had some resemblance to phenomena in the literature. But it isn't in a stable limit cycle. The man who wrote to me was worried by that, because he was one of the people who would live in Nine's habitat. He called me and asked if I would make a trip out here and look at Nine, without telling anyone back home where I was going—he had promised to keep this secret, just as all the others had.

"I agreed, and I must say I was fascinated by the whole project. When I arrived here, ten days ago, I was greeted very warmly—almost embarrassingly warmly—by Marcia Seretto, and shown Nine with great pride. In her eagerness to show me how my ideas had been implemented it did not occur to her immediately to ask why I was here. Nine was doing wonderfully well as a possible space habitat, easily sustaining the three humans inside it. But I realized at once that it hadn't stabilized. And it has still not stabilized. It is *evolving,* and evolving fast. I have no idea of its end state, but I do know this: the life cycles in Ecosphere Nine are more efficient than those on Earth and that means they are biologically more *aggressive.* I pointed that out to Marcia, and five days ago I recommended action."

A door slammed downstairs and I heard a hubbub of voices.

"What did you recommend?" asked Tom. He ignored the downstairs noise.

"That the human occupants of Nine be removed from it at once. And that the whole ecosphere be sterilized. I appealed to the staff to support my views. But I didn't realize at the time how things are run here. Marcia controls everything, and I think she is insane. She violently opposed my suggestions, and to prove her point that there is no danger she herself went into Ecosphere Nine. She is there now, together with the man who brought me out here. And she insisted that I be held here. No one will say for how long, or what will happen to me next."

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There was a clatter of footsteps on the spiral staircase and Scott burst into the room followed by the other four who had brought us here. His face was pale, but he was obviously relieved when he saw all three of us quietly seated at the table.

"You lied," he said to me. "You have nothing to do with our Philadelphia chapter, or any other. You have to come with me. Marcia wants to talk to you. Both of you."

"What about me?" said Lockyer.

"She didn't say anything about seeing you."

"Well, I need to talk to her." He stood up. "Let's go."

"We're not supposed to take you."

"We won't go if Lockyer doesn't," I said quickly. "You'll have to drag us."

Scott and the others looked agonized. They weren't at all the types to approve of violence, but they had to follow orders.

"All right," said Scott at last. "All of you. Come on."

He led the three of us downstairs, with the others close behind. I expected to go back to the dome and peer in again through a cleared patch of wall panel, but instead we headed for the main building. I looked across at the dome. It was almost four in the afternoon and the sun was lower in the sky. The dome's internal lights must be on, for its panels were glowing now with a mottling of pale purples and greens.

When we had entered the main building earlier in the day it had seemed deserted. Now it swarmed with people. The entrance area had been equipped with a 48-inch TV projection screen, a TV camera, and about twenty chairs. Men and women were sitting on the chairs, staring silently at the screen. They were all in their early twenties and they all had the same squeaky-clean airhead look that we had first noticed in Scott.

As the main attraction we were led to chairs in the front row, and found ourselves staring up at the screen.

What we were looking at had to be the interior of Ecosphere Nine. There was a purple-green tinge to the air, as though it were filled with microscopic floating dust motes, and as the camera inside Nine panned across the interior I could see peculiar mushroom-shaped plants, three or four feet high, rising from the floor. And that floor was nothing like the soil we had seen in Ecosphere Eight. It was a fuzzy, wispy carpet of pale green and white, as though the whole area had been planted with alfalfa sprouts. As I watched, the carpet rippled and began to change color to a darker tone.

Lockyer grunted and leaned forward, but before the color change was complete the camera had zoomed in on three figures sitting on the floor

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near the far side of the dome. It focused still closer, so that only Marcia Seretto was in the field of view.

She must have been able to see exactly what was happening in the room we were in, because she at once pointed her finger at us. "I gave no instructions for *him* to be brought here," she said in a hoarse voice. The golliwog face was angry. "Can't you obey the simplest directive?"

"The other two refused to come without Professor Lockyer." Scott was close to groveling. "I thought the best thing to do was bring all three of them."

"I was the one who insisted on being here, Marcia," said Lockyer. He was not at all put out by her manner and he was studying her closely. "And I was quite right to do so. You have to get out of Nine—at once. Take a look at yourself, and listen to yourself. Look around you at the air. You're inhaling spores all the time, the air is full of them, and God knows what they'll do to you. And look at those fungi—if they are still fungi—like nothing you've ever seen before. The habitat is changing faster than ever."

She glared out of the screen at him. "Professor Lockyer, I respect you as a teacher, but on matters like this you don't know what you are talking about. I feel fine, the people in here with me feel fine. This is just what we have been looking for, a small habitat that will support humans and is perfect for use in space." She waved her arm. "Take a close look. We have more efficient energy utilization than we ever dreamed of, and that means we can make more compact living environments."

"Marcia, didn't you understand what I said?" Lockyer was not the type to raise his voice, but he spoke more slowly and clearly, as though to a small child. "You're not in a stable environment, as you seem to think. You are involved with a different attractor from any you've seen before, and everything in the ecosphere will be governed by it. You hear me? *The habitat is evolving.* And you form part of the habitat. If you remain there, neither I nor anyone else can predict what is going to happen. You have to get out—now."

She ignored him completely. "As for you two," she said to me and Tom. "I don't know why you came here and I don't much care. You represent a sheer nuisance and I'm not going to allow you to interfere with our work."

"So what are you going to do with us?" I asked.

"We don't owe you one thing. No one asked you two to come here, no one wanted you to come here. We'll decide if you leave and when you leave." Her protruding eyes bulged farther than ever and she rapped out: "What we're doing is more important than any individual. But I'll listen to you. If you can offer any reason why you shouldn't be held until we're ready to let you go, tell me now."

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The force of personality, even through a TV link, was frightening. It made my nerves jangle and I could think of nothing at all to say. The surprise came from Tom.

"Professor Lockyer was your professor, wasn't he?" he said quietly. "The spiritual father of the Habitat League."

"What of it?"

"He provided you with the original idea for habitats, and the original designs for them. He's one of the world experts on microbial life forms, far more knowledgeable than anyone here. When he says it's dangerous in Nine, shouldn't you believe him?"

"I respect Professor Lockyer. But he has no experience with habitats of this size. And he's wrong about Nine." Marcia glared at us. "Anything else?"

When we did not speak she nodded and said, "Scott, take them back. All three of them. And then I want you here."

Within ten minutes we were back upstairs in the windowless building and sitting again at the same table. The thick outer door on the ground floor had been locked, and two women members of the project had been left outside as guards. They had a radio unit with them, and knowing Marcia's style it wouldn't have surprised me if the two of them were expected to watch us all night.

Lockyer picked up his wine glass, still half-full from our rapid departure. "At least we know where we are with Marcia."

"She's a maniac," I said. "How long does she intend to stay in that habitat?"

"Maybe months. Certainly weeks."

"Continuously?"

He nodded. "She has to. That's the whole point about the habitat being a complete ecosphere. She's part of it, and if she leaves she upsets the thermal and material balance. Also, anyone who goes in and out provides a disturbance of another type, too: they carry foreign organisms. Even if it's only bacteria or viruses, every new living entry destroys the totally sealed nature of the habitat."

I was listening with half an ear and trying to think of ways we might get away. But Tom came to full attention and grabbed my arm hard enough to hurt. "Are you saying what I think you are?" he said to Lockyer. "When Marcia Seretto comes out of Ecosystem Nine, she'll bring out with her anything that happens to be in there."

"Roughly speaking. Of course, I'm talking mainly at a micro-organism level. She won't come out carrying plants and fungi."

"But you have no idea which part of the habitat is the 'aggressive' part. For all you know, when Marcia and the others step out of that habitat they'll be carrying with them the seeds of something that is more

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efficient and vigorous than the natural biosphere here on Earth. The damned thing could take over the whole planet. It'll be the Mega-Mother they talked about in that letter, wiping out the natural biosphere—and maybe we won't be able to live in it."

Lockyer put down his glass and frowned at the table. "I don't think so," he said at last. "The chances are, any ecosystem that works in the habitat won't be well-suited to control the Earth's biosphere. If it were, it should have occurred naturally during biological history."

Then he was silent for a much longer interval, and when he looked up his face was troubled. "But I am reminded of one thing. Marcia had an excellent understanding of recombinant DNA techniques. If she has been using them, to create tailored forms that provide efficient energy utilization and a more efficient ecosphere . . ."

"Then we'll all be in trouble when she comes out—and the longer she stays in there, the worse the odds." Tom jumped to his feet. "We can't risk wiping out Earth life, even if the chances are only one in a million that it will happen. We have to get the people out of Nine—and sterilize it."

"Sure. How do we get out of *here* for starters?" I said.

But Tom was already rushing down the spiral stairs. By the time I followed him he was hurtling towards the heavy outside door. He hit it at full speed, all two hundred and thirty pounds of him. It didn't cave in or fly open, but it certainly shivered on its hinges.

Tom hammered at it with both fists. "Open up!" he roared. "Open up!"

Only an idiot or a genius would expect jailers to respond to a command like that, but the Habitat League members were different—or maybe they were just used to obeying orders.

"What do you want?" said a nervous voice.

"We have to get out. There's a—a f-fire in here."

There was a scream of horror from the other side of the door, and a rattling of a key. Before the door could fully open Tom was pushing through. The two women were standing there, mouths gaping.

I tried to move past Tom. I knew what would happen next. He could never bring himself to hit a woman and he would just stand there. They had been foolish enough to let us out, but now they would either shout for help over the radio or run for the other building—and they were used to being at ten thousand feet. We would never keep up. It was up to me to stop them.

I had underestimated Tom. He reached out and grabbed the girls by the neck, one in each hand. While I watched in astonishment he banged their heads ruthlessly together and dropped the women half-stunned to the floor.

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This was Tom, the gentlest of men! I stared at him in disbelief. I thought, *you've come a long way, baby.*

But he was off, blundering away in the semi-darkness towards the dome that housed Ecosystem Nine. "Take care of them," he shouted over his shoulder. "I need five minutes."

They didn't need much taking care of. They were down in the dirt, flinching away when I bent towards them. I picked up the radio and swung it by its strap against the wall of the building. The case cracked open and the batteries flew out. When I bent over one of the women and grabbed her arm, she moaned in fear and wriggled away from me.

"Inside," I said. With Lockyer's help—he had finally sauntered downstairs and out of the building—I pushed them through the door, slammed it, and turned the key. Then I walked—slowly, I might need my wind in a minute or two—towards the main building. Tom had said he needed five minutes. If anything had been sent over the radio before I destroyed it, I wasn't sure I could guarantee him five seconds.

I sneaked closer in the gathering darkness with Lockyer just behind me. The door of the building remained closed, and there was no sign of activity there. I crept forward to look in the window. Three people sat quietly reading.

"The dome!" said Lockyer in an urgent whisper. Then he moved rapidly away from me.

I looked after him. The third dome, the one that housed Nine, was glowing bright pink in the night. The internal lighting level had been turned way up.

After one more glance at the main building—all still quiet there—I headed after Lockyer. If one of the project teams happened to be outside, they would surely be drawn to the bright dome. I could help Tom better there than I could anywhere else.

He was standing by the dome controls and trying to peer in through one of the wall panels. The telephone was in his hand, but he was not using it.

"Can't get any response," he said when he saw me. "I called inside, told Marcia to get the hell out of there while they could. But not a word back. Not one word."

I saw that the illumination level on the control panel had been turned to its maximum and the internal temperature was set at sterilization level—three hundred and twenty Celsius, hot enough to kill any organism that I knew about, hot enough even to destroy the Mega-Mother. The panel control knobs were broken off and lay on the floor.

"Tom, you'll kill them."

"I hope not. I warned them. I'm not going to stop. I won't stop until Ecosphere Nine is burned clean, and anyway I *can't* stop it—I buggered

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the controls here." He turned to Lockyer. "These people all respect you, they'll at least listen. Go back to the building where they have the TV, and see what's going on inside Nine. Tell them all that Marcia has to get out in the next ten minutes, otherwise she'll be cooked."

Lockyer didn't flap easily. He nodded and set off without a word. I stood around useless for a little while, and finally followed him. There was nothing to be done here and at least I could confirm what Lockyer said to the others.

The door was wide open when I got there and the building reception area was empty. Lockyer stood frozen in front of the big TV screen. It was still turned on, with the dome's camera set to provide a general view of the interior. The glare of lights at their maximum setting showed every detail.

Nine had changed again. No part of it resembled any Earth plant or animal that I could recognize. The floating spores were gone but the air was filled with tiny, wriggling threadworms, supported on gossamer strands attached to the walls and ceiling. The fuzzy carpet of green and white alfalfa sprouts had gone, too, passing through a color change and a riotous growth. The sprouts had formed long, wispy tendrils of purple-black, threading the whole interior and wriggling like a tangle of thin snakes across the floor and up the walls. They were connected to the squat mushroom plants, and small black spheres hung on them like beads on a necklace.

The increased lighting level seemed to be driving the whole ecosphere to a frenzy of activity. A crystalline silver framework of lines and nodes was forming, linking all parts of the dome into a tetrahedral lattice. The habitat pulsed with energy. As I watched a new wave of black spheres began to inch their way towards the middle of the dome, where a great cluster of them sat on a lumpy structure near the dome's center.

It took me a few seconds to recognize that structure. It was formed of Marcia and her two companion crew members.

They sat quietly on the floor of the dome. Black spheres formed a dense layer over their bodies, and long tendrils of wriggling white grew from ears, mouths, and nostrils. Their skins had a wrinkled, withered look.

I grabbed at Lockyer's arm. "We have to get back to the dome," I exclaimed. "Turn off the heat. Marcia and the others are still inside and they're . . ."

They're still alive, I was going to say. But when I looked at them I could not believe it.

"No point now," said Lockyer in a hushed voice. "It's too late." And then, still capable of objective analysis, he added, "Drained. Drained and absorbed. They are on the way to becoming part of the ecosphere. It's evolving faster than ever, accepting everything. Look at the walls."

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I saw that the dome's wall panels had an eroded, eaten look. Where the gossamer threads were attached, the hard panel material was being dissolved. In places the plastic support ribbing was almost eaten through. Given a little more time, Ecosphere Nine would break free of the dome's constraint and have access to the vast potential habitat of Earth.

But Nine would not be given time.

The internal temperature was rising rapidly. As we watched, the support tendrils began to writhe and convulse. The silver network shivered. Black spheres were thrown free and rolled around on the floor, pulping delicate filaments beneath them. As the mushroom structures split open, ejecting a black fluid that spattered across the interior, it was easy to see the ecosphere as one great organism, sucking in more and more energy from the blazing lights and fighting desperately for survival while the temperature went up and up.

(There was a clatter of footsteps and two men and a woman came into the room. Lockyer and I hardly noticed them. They sensed that something final and terrible was happening and they joined us, staring in horror at the TV screen.)

Ecosphere Nine was losing its battle. The black spheres inflated and burst, throwing off puffs of vapor like popping corn as the internal temperature rose above boiling point. Gossamer threads shriveled and fell to the floor, long tendrils writhed and withered. In the blistering heat the broken mushroom structures sagged and dwindled, sinking back to floor level.

Steam filled the interior, and in the final moments it was difficult to see; but I was watching when the last spheres fell away from Marcia and her companions, and the tendrils trailed limp from their open mouths. What remained was hardly recognizable as human beings. Their bodies were eaten away, corroded to show the staring white bones of chest and limbs.

And then, quite suddenly, it ended. Tendrils slowed and drooped, spheres lay on the floor like burst balloons. The silver lattice disappeared. Inside the dome, nothing moved but rising steam.

Lockyer felt his way towards one of the metal chairs and collapsed into it. The three camp members next to him clung to each other and wept.

I went outside and called to Tom. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, but I can't see into the dome. What's happening?"

"It's over," I said. "It's dead. They're all dead."

And then I leaned over in the cold Colorado night, and vomited until I thought I was going to die, too.

I thought that was the end, but of course it was just the beginning.

No one could think of sleep that night. There seemed to be a thousand

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things to do: police to be informed, families told, the interior of the dome inspected, the bodies recovered.

But none of this could begin until the morning, and some of it would take much longer; the dome needed at least forty-eight hours to cool before anyone could go inside.

Tom, Jason Lockyer, and I went back to our former prison and sat at the table, talking and drinking wine. I didn't ask the vintage or the pedigree, and I didn't care what it would do to my stomach or my liver. I sluiced it down—we all did.

"Thank God it's over," I said, after several minutes of silence.

Lockyer sighed. "Back to the real world. Pity in some ways; I quite like it here. You've no idea how complimented a professor feels when his students appreciate him enough to take his teaching and actually *implement* it. I'll be sorry to leave."

Not a word about wife Eleanor, waiting with her claws out back in Washington.

"I don't think you should leave," said Tom. "In fact, I don't think any of us should leave. It would be irresponsible."

He was sitting with his shirtsleeves rolled up and his hands in a bowl of cold water. There were great bruises on them, from where he had hammered on the metal door, and his fingertips were bloody from tearing off the dome's control knobs.

"But there's nothing to do here now," I said. "With Marcia dead the group will break up."

"I hope not. I hope they will all stay here." Tom looked at Lockyer. "The job's not finished, is it?"

Lockyer shook his head. "I think I know what you mean and no, it's not finished. There is no self-contained ecosphere that can support a human population."

"Who cares?" My mind was boiling over with a hundred dreadful images from the interior of Habitat Nine. I couldn't get out of my head the thought of Marcia and the others, invaded by the organisms of the habitat. Had she realized what was happening to her in those final few minutes before her mind and body succumbed? I hoped not.

"If I have the choice," I went on, "I'll never look at an ecosphere again—never. Let the Ascend Forever people have their fun, but keep me out."

"That's the problem," said Tom. "We can't stay out. No one can. We destroyed Ecosphere Nine, but this group isn't the only one trying to create self-contained habitats. There must be a dozen others around the world."

"At least that," said Lockyer. "The Habitat League used to send me newsletters."

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"Fine." I didn't like the expression on Tom's face—all the softness had gone from it. "Let them play. That doesn't mean *we* have to."

"I'm afraid it does," said Tom. "If the endpoint for the biological forms of Ecosphere Nine is a stable attractor, it can arise from a whole variety of different starting conditions. So if people keep on experimenting, Nine can show up again. We were lucky. Nine didn't break free and come into contact with Biosphere One—the whole Earth—but it came close. If one did get free you couldn't sterilize the Earth the way we did with the chamber."

"But that seems like a case *against* fooling around any more with the ecospheres," I protested. "If more habitats are made here they'll add to the danger of a wild one getting loose."

Lockyer and Tom looked at each other. "She's right, of course," said Lockyer. "But so are you, Tom. We're damned if we do and we're damned if we don't. We have to keep working, so we'll understand ways that ecospheres can develop and learn how to handle dangerous forms."

"And we need to find a biosphere that people can live in in space," said Tom. "We're going to need it—if anything like Nine ever gets free on Earth."

That was two months ago. Tom, Jason Lockyer, and I went back to Washington, but only to clean up unfinished business that the three of us left behind. Then we returned to Colorado.

Amazingly, nearly half the staff of the project elected to stay on. They are a dedicated group, putting the project ahead of everything. Even before Marcia brainwashed them, they were all space fanatics. Thanks to them, the project picked up again with hardly a hitch. Ecospheres Ten, Eleven, and Twelve are already in operation. None of them looks particularly promising—and none looks anything like Nine.

Naturally, every aspect of ecosphere development is closely monitored. Jason Lockyer supervises every biological change and approves every technique used. It is hard to image how any group could be more careful.

And Tom runs the whole show—shy, introverted, overweight Tom Walton. But he is not the man I met in his stamp shop in Washington. He has lost thirty pounds, he doesn't stammer, he never mentions stamps. He does not have Marcia's domineering manner, but he makes up for that with his sense of urgency. And if he pushes others, he pushes himself harder. Like Ecosphere Nine, he is still changing, developing, evolving. He will become—I don't know what.

I'm not sure I like the new Tom Walton—the Tom I helped to shape—as well as the old one. Sometimes I feel that I, like Marcia, created my own monster, so that now under his leadership we must all become God, the Builder of Worlds.

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And also, perhaps, their annihilator.

(It was Jason Lockyer, the calmest and most cerebral of our group, who recalled Robert Oppenheimer's quotation of Vishnu from the *Bhagavad Gita,* at the time of the testing of the first atomic bomb: "I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds.")

Which brings my thoughts, again and again, to Marcia. How much did she understand, at the very end, as Nine took her for its own and the world around her faded? Surely she knew at least this much, that she had created a monster. But Nine was *her* monster, her baby, her private universe, her unique creation, and in some sense she must have loved it. Loved it so much that when logic said the ecosphere must be destroyed, she could not bring herself to do it. She must have somehow justified her actions. What did she say, what did she think, how did she *feel,* in those last minutes?

I hope that I will never know. ●

NEXT ISSUE

We have an unusual treat in store for you next month, as multiple Nebula and Hugo-winner **Robert Silverberg** returns with our March cover story, "In Another Country." This is a vivid and evocative story of time-travel, passion, and intrigue in its own right, but it is *also* a companion piece to C.L. Moore's famous story "Vintage Season." Not a sequel, exactly, but a story covering the same cataclysmic, history-altering events and viewing the same characters from a radically-different perspective, producing, in Silverberg's words, "a work interwoven with hers the way the lining of a cape is interwoven with the cape." This is one of the most fascinating stories Silverberg has ever done, and one you won't want to miss. Another multiple award-winner. **Harlan Ellison,** is on hand for March, back in our pages and at the top of his form with "The Few, the Proud," a hard-hitting, angry and compassionate study of future war, ancient madness, and moral responsibility—this is Ellison at his best.

ALSO IN MARCH: **Kim Stanley Robinson** takes us to the colonized Moon of the twenty-first century, where the local film industry is booming, for a playful look at people who are engaged in "Remaking History"; new writer **Janet Kagan,** making an impressive *IAsfm* debut, takes us along to a far planet to meet a woman whose job it is to cope with some very dangerous and very odd creatures, and follows her as she unravels a compelling biological mystery, in the wry and suspensful "The Loch Moose Monster"; **Thomas Wylde** paints a riveting portrait of a man struggling to deal with a Wild Talent that is slowly ruining his life, in "Black Nimbus"; and **James Patrick Kelly** returns with a bittersweet and subtle study of identity and loss, in the melancholy "Dancing With the Chairs." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our March issue on sale on your newsstands on February 7, 1989

COMING SOON: big new stories by Nancy Kress, Harry Turtledove, Tanith Lee, Gregory Benford, Charles Sheffield, Judith Moffett, John M. Ford, George Alec Effinger, Robert Silverberg, Suzy McKee Charnas, Avram Davidson, Vic Milan, Lucius Shepard, Orson Scott Card, Jack Dann, and many more.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Mona à la Mode

Mona Lisa Overdrive
By William Gibson
Bantam, $18.95

There are two lines from William Gibson's *Mona Lisa Overdrive* that have reverberations as one forges through the novel.

At the beginning of Chapter 34: " 'You seem lost,' the noodle seller said . . ."

This could be aptly directed to a good percentage of the readers, whom I predict will at this point have a slightly glazed look in their eyes.

Near the beginning of Chapter 39: "The world hadn't ever had so many moving parts or so few labels," thinks Mona, the not-very-bright hooker. This is a splendid description of Gibson's novel, typically phrased in Gibson's punchy, often knockout prose.

The basic plot is an astonishingly convoluted piece of intrigue aiming at the murder of a super stim star (one gathers only by intuition and convention that stims are enhanced multisensual entertainments), set in motion by the reclusive female heir of a corporate dynasty, now in residence in a decaying space habitat. At least I think that's the basic plot—in any case, it makes *The Big Sleep* seem about as simplistic as *Cinderella*.

This is placed in a next-century setting that is equally complicated. The Japanese seem to be top dogs on the economic heap, there are feuds among the *Yakuza* (which enter into the plot), and the U.S. is the by-now-familiar decaying environment mostly inhabited, it appears, by druggies and criminals. There's a good deal of attention paid to cyberspace, which is the sum total of data in the human system; some of the action takes place there, since it can be accessed in various ways.

Don't get me wrong. The novel is anything but unreadable. Scene by scene it's often thrilling and intriguing. The characters are varied and idiosyncratic; if not three-dimensional, they're so colorfully two-dimensional as not to matter. The story is told in round robin fashion from four different points of view: that of the thirteen-year-old daughter of a powerful Yakuza, sent to London for safety during a Yakuza power struggle; an ex-con layabout artist living in an abandoned factory in an area of New Jersey blighted by pollution; Angle, the stim star, focus of the plot and just back from a drug rehab

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facility; and Mona (Lisa), the poor slob of a hooker who, because she bears a faint resemblance to Angle, gets sold by her pimp to double for Angle's (potential) corpse.

The details and concepts of life in this world of many moving parts are equally edifying—new devices, social modes, ways of taking drugs, cyberspace itself . . . Trouble is that I too often found myself researching backwards—had I missed an earlier reference to this idea, or was I just supposed to accept it until (if) it's explained? Ditto several characters.

Things more or less add up by the time you've reached the end. This is the future à la mode—and it's not the fault of Mr. Gibson, who contributed many of the original ideas, that all these druggy, trashy, cybernet next-centuries are beginning to blur into each other. Their very *verismo* makes them seem both inevitable and interchangeable.

Neat Trolls Et Al.

The Dragonbone Chair
By Tad Williams
DAW, $19.95

This doesn't happen very often. I find myself at a loss for words, wondering what to say about Tad Williams's *The Dragonbone Chair*. Why am I speechless? Not because it's so good. But also, Lord knows, not because it's bad. Williams is a smooth, accomplished writer, and he tells his story well. But how often has this story been told? And yet, because he does it well, one doesn't want to trash it—if one must have oft-told tales, let them be well told.

The land of Orsten Ard consists of various human kingdoms, brought fairly recently under the rule of a sort of High King ruling out of the castle called the Hayholt, the history of which dates back to the days when the Fair Folk, the *Sithi,* ruled the land. In the castle there's a bumbling adolescent scullion named Simon, an orphan whose paternal antecedents are obscure. An interest is taken in Simon by the castle magician, who is kindly, absent-minded, and powerful, and Simon becomes his helper. When the old King, Prester John, dies, there is friction between his two sons—the heir, known as suitable if a bit unsubtle, begins to act strangely on his accession, under the influence of an evil priest. This priest is a defector from a circle to which the magician belongs, a circle meant to watch out for the stirring of ancient evil things from the time of legend, and of course, they have begun to stir.

Simon helps the dead King's other son to escape from the castle; in the resulting brouhaha, the kindly old magician is killed. Simon flees to the Old Forest, where he meets a wandering troll (a good guy) and one of the legendary Fair Folk (ambiguous), whose life he saves. There's a runaway Princess disguised as a boy, lots of intrigue and betrayals among the myriad members of the ruling families of various kingdoms, an ice dragon,

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and a quest for a couple of legendary swords.

There are attempts at originality here. The trolls, for instance, are neat little guys who live in the far North and whose culture has more than a touch of the Inuit. But all too often, as you're reading along, there is a strong sense of *déjà vu,* in general as well as particulars (the Old Forest doesn't like strangers, the Sithi have a nice cave with a balcony-opening in a cliff). And the novel is *long* (about 650 pages). This is an advantage in one way. It's nice to have a leisurely pace where you get to know the characters, the locales, and the situation. But when the quest for the swords *begins* when the book is about three-quarters over, you have the sinking feeling that this is going to be one of those ongoing cliff-hanging numbers. It is, indeed—"Book One" it says on the title page (it doesn't say of how many). With a novel *this* long, one feels at least entitled to get a conclusion.

But do you see my point? There's nothing really to say about this novel that hasn't been said about a dozen other perfectly capable high fantasies over the past few years. And so, says you (and rightfully so), why did you take so much space to say it?

Greenhouse Effective

Drowning Towers
By George Turner
Arbor House, $18.95

Last summer's drought caused a revival of talk about the greenhouse effect, and George Turner's neatly-timed novel, *Drowning Towers,* gives us a preview of what to expect from it in the next century, a chilling glimpse of civilization-as-we-know-it in the process of crumbling; it's like reading a novel set in fifth-century Gaul.

Things haven't totally reverted to barbarism, or anything quite so simple. The setting is Melbourne, Australia—because of its locale, Australia, "the Lucky Country," has been less effected than any place in the Northern Hemisphere. Nevertheless, from our point of view, things are a mess. Hard-pressed Asians have occupied half the Australian continent (more or less legally) and meddled with the weather systems to make it arable. Drought-caused food shortages are endemic; the population continues to grow; the water is rising all over the globe and Melbourne's Yarra River periodically floods the lowest parts of the city, where the "Swill" live. They are the ninety percent unemployed. The "Sweet" live in the higher suburbs—suburbs being a polite term for enclaves where there is still law and social order.

In the high-rise slum towers of the Swill, there is no effective government influence whatsoever except minimal welfare. Elevators don't run, garbage is not collected, the police don't enter. Each tower has in effect become its own government, which varies from anarchic despotism to a crude sort of democracy.

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There is a bare percentage of people living between Sweet and Swill, known as the Fringe, those who have been "superannuated" (one is no longer fired or let go) and still have some savings—un- employment insurance is as much a thing of the past as winter.

In this crumbling milieu, *Drowning Towers* follows the adolescence and young manhood of two brothers, reduced to the Fringe in childhood by the superannuation of their father. Teddy is drafted by the government as an "Extra," part of a program in which Fringe and even Swill youth who show promise are given training, and goes into Police Intelligence. Frank, with a wild talent for mental mathematics, works for the illegal economy—the figures he does in his head can't be traced.

They and the people with whom they're involved—their widowed mother, the tower boss whom she takes as a lover and protector, Frank's tough female employer, Teddy's training officer—form a montage of life in these moribund times. Billy, the tower boss, is an especially intriguing character, a lowlife with pretensions *and* capabilities beyond his Swill status. He enlists government aid in fighting off an invasion of his building by the bosses from another tower. The government does send in help—it prefers to keep a status quo in Swill territory—but the forces sent (including Teddy) must be disguised as Swill.

And then a new and strange disease breaks out in the towers, an odd variation of AIDS. Billy suspects it to be the beginning of the cull—the government extermination of the Swill that he has been expecting—and involves everyone in the tracking down of its (artificial) source.

Drowning Towers is a particularly good example of cautionary SF. The extrapolation is firmly based on today's terrifying facts, but it is neither preachy nor didactic. It tells an intelligent and often exciting story through characters that are notably well drawn, and if you're a thinking person, it is scarier than any axe-murderer movie.

Trouble Trip

Anachronisms

By Christopher Hinz

St. Martin's, $17.95

In Christopher Hinz's *Anachronisms,* you have a nine-person exploratory expedition, in a ship that's computerized to the teeth (it's not self-aware, but so close as to make no never mind). Now you know you have trouble when you realize that you wouldn't trust most of this crew to accomplish a successful expedition to the local 7-11. There's a neurotic Psionic by the name of Mars Lea Frock with super abilities and the conviction that she's a freak. There's a philosophical Lieutenant who obsessively sketches Babylonian demons on the bridge hologram and is about to go round the bend. The captain is indecisive, the science officer is

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truculent and tends to endanger the expedition to further his experiments, and there's also a state-of-the-art cyborg type who interfaces with the ship's systems (through a cable leading from a hole in his forehead).

Anybody not expecting problems on *this* trip is out of his mind, and sure enough, they come. As one crew member puts it about halfway through the novel: "... just look at this whole mess. We find an incredible life form on a planet that can't support life, our lieutenant goes insane, kills the life form and almost burns us to a cinder. Mars Lea, who's bizarre to begin with, is about to go over the edge, we've got robot malfunctions that are just not possible, and now we have a goddamn starship out in the middle of nowhere, tracking us! Jesus Christ—add it up! Something's going on!"

Things get worse before they get better. Killer robots run amok, ship systems fail and the computer refuses to acknowledge that anything's wrong, and Mars Lea and the cyborg have an affair.

Before they get to the bottom of all this, the reader has gotten more than a little impatient with this unpleasant crew. The fact that part of the cause of the chaos is a set-up by an official of the Consortium that mounted the expedition doesn't help. (The official is out to get the lieutenant, and knows that Mars Lea's psionic broadcasting will send him over the edge.) And it seems that the alien thing is not dead, but can exist as a sort of energy web that can penetrate computer circuitry. And what's more, there are two of them, one a bad guy thing that wants to take over the universe, and the other a good guy thing that was a sort of jailer for the bad guy thing.

By this time, you're rooting for the bad guy thing. It all resolves in a cosmic dustup in the psionic universe, way beyond the energy fields we know (to paraphrase Dunsany), and the ship and survivors rather arbitrarily get thrown 350 years into the future. The bad guy and Mars Lea, who has become an entropy junction (don't ask *me*) and a "mobile prison," take off to explore the stars.

All this just might have worked if Hinz were better at creating characters. This kind of closed-environment story with a minimal cast demands characters that involve and interest the reader; in this case, they're people that you just don't care about. Creating people has always been a problem in SF, and despite recent gains in that area, continues to be so.

Feminist Angels

Angel Island
By Inez Haynes Gillmore
NAL-Plume, $8.95 (paper)

Early in the century, five men, survivors of a shipwreck, are washed ashore on an idyllic island in the South Pacific. What with salvage from the wreck and the island's natural resources, they have no trouble surviving and even

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making themselves comfortable. Soon they realize there are presences on the island, which turn out to be five winged women, who do not live there but fly from the south. They are intrigued by the men, but will never come within reach. After months of cat and mouse (in which there is a natural quintuple pairing off by long-distance mutual attraction), the men capture the women and cut their wings. The women, whose feet are so atrophied that they can barely walk, are reconciled to their fate because of their love for the men; they learn English, bear children (the one girl has wings, the boys don't), and become "domesticated," but eventually rebel when the men reveal that they intend to clip the girl's wings when she reaches marriageable age.

This dippy scenario is the basis for Inez Haynes Gillmore's long-lost fantasy, *Angel Island.* When I first read it, many years ago (but not, I must add, on its initial printing, which was in 1914), my adolescent romantic soul was enchanted by it. The women were all gorgeously beautiful, and their hair, coloring, and wings were all color coordinated. (The "Spanish one," as the men dubbed her, had scarlet wings, black hair, Andulusian complexion, and wore nothing but scarlet blossoms.) The men were all handsome, intelligent, and, by the standards of the day, gentlemen—a scholar, a playboy, an entrepreneur, a writer/musician, and an upper-class adventurer. And Gillmore, with a kind of insouciant realism (the period slang of the men—"I always jump when I see a carrot-top"—is a delight), pulls it off as a story.

What I didn't know back then was that I was reading a piece of suffragette polemics. Gillmore was active in the feminist movement, and the novel is an ingenious piece of propaganda. You notice that I made a point of saying above that the men were all "gentlemen." This is important, since even in the "classless" America of eighty years ago, class *was* a factor, and a gentleman knew how a lady should be treated. And it is by treating these women, who are essentially clean slates culturally, as ladies *should* be treated that the men court disaster.

Many points are made, both covertly and overtly. The winged state of the women, for instance, can be taken to represent the mind of the unmarried girl (read virgin for the period), still flexible and unfettered. But often enough the conversation gets down to the direct essence: "It's lack of gray matter," says one of the men. "They're nothing but an unrelated bunch of instincts, intuitions, and impulses —human nonsense machines." And the women don't emerge as blameless "(The men) really do like thinking. How curious," says one. "I won't think," says another. "I *feel.* That's the way to live." "We don't have to think any more than we have to walk, for we are air-creatures," says a third.

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The polemics are mostly obsolete now, but still fascinating as a primer on where feminism is coming *from,* and there are flashes of attitudes still encountered after all these years. But ignoring all that, *Angel Island* is an oddball and charming period piece about ten likable human (?) beings sorting out their relationships in very strange circumstances.

This new edition has an introduction by Ursula K. Le Guin, which the publisher was unable to supply in advance of publication. I'm sure, though, that that sophisticated author's views on this unsophisticated novel are illuminating.

Shoptalk

Sequels and prequels and whatall . . . Tom Disch dishes out the giggles again with his heroic household appliances in *The Brave Little Toaster Goes To Mars* (Doubleday, $11.95) . . . Patricia Kennealy gives us *The Silver Branch,* "a novel of the Keltiad" and a prequel to *The Copper Crown* and *The Throne of Scone* (NAL, $18.95) . . . Old pro Gordon Dickson continues his ever on-going "Childe Cycle" with *The Chantry Guild* (Ace, $17.95) . . .Don't ever say I'm self-indulgent. Having devoted a fair amount of space to Terry Pratchett's last two books, it would be grossly self-indulgent to review the new one, since reading it was a delight and quoting from it almost irresistible. But I will restrain myself, and only note that it's just as wildly funny as the other two (it also takes place on the Discworld, but concerns a different set of characters) and is called *Equal Rites* (Signet, $3.50, paper).

On the anthology front, the title of *The Best Horror Stories From The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (edited by Ed Ferman and Anne Jordan) says it all, albeit rather lengthily (St. Martin's, $22.95) . . . A "first annual" that looks promising is *The Year's Best Fantasy* edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (St. Martin's, $12.95, paper).

As to nonfiction, Robert L. Forward's *Future Magic* is prefaced by the quote from Arthur C. Clarke: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," which gives a clue to the book's slant and title (Avon, $3.95, paper) . . . For readers mad enough to want to throw themselves into the writing jungle, there's Christopher Evans' *Writing Science Fiction,* a succinct how-to book (St. Martin's, $10.95).

It was understood at its limited, hard-cover publication that Stephen King's *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger* would never appear in any other form, and it therefore became a sought-after collectors' item. But it is now available in trade paperback. It's intriguingly different from his usual work (NAL-Plume, $10.95, paper) . . . Also a change of pacer, this time for Poul Anderson, was his recently-reprinted *Hrolf Kraki's Saga,* Anderson's recreation (first published in 1973) of a Norse saga. The mythology of Northern Europe is, of

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course, Anderson's turf, but this one sticks very closely in form to its saga origins, making few concessions to modern sensibilities (Baen, $2.95, paper).

Norman Spinrad spins a tour de force in *Other Americas* by giving us four possible future Americas in four novellas which he calls "cautionary tales" (Bantam, $3.95, paper) . . . Somebody has finally had the courage to publish a not-new novel by J. G. Ballard that has never before appeared in this country despite its name, which is *Hello America* (Carroll & Graf, $17.95) . . . And of course a new Ursula K. Le Guin collection has got to be noted. The delicious title is *Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences* (NAL-Plume, $6.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., N.Y., N.Y. 10014. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Now's the time for the hot-stove league of relaxed cons (HexaCon, RustyCon, CzarKon, CaveCon, etc.). Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3313, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with music keyboard.

DECEMBER, 1988

30-Jan. 1—**EveCon.** For info, write: **Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001.** Or Call: **(703) 360-2292** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Washington DC (if city omitted, same as in address). A younger crowd than most other DC-area cons. At the National Clarion Hotel in suburban Arlington VA.

JANUARY, 1989

6-8—**HexaCon.** Shawnee Resort, Lancaster PA. Springer, Blanchard, Kaye, Betancourt, Schweitzer.

20-22—**ConFusion, % AASFA, Box 8284R, Ann Arbor MI 48107.** Southfield, MI. About 1,000 expected.

20-22—**RustyCon, Box 47132, Seattle WA 98146. (206) 340-1218.** J. Chalker, K. Freas. R. Wright.

27-29—**Boskone, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 625-2311.** Springfield MA. Tim Powers.

FEBRUARY, 1989

3-5—**SFeraCon, % SFera, Ivanicgradska 41 A, Zagreb 41000, Yugoslavia.** Long-time East bloc con.

3-5—**ConFabulation, Box 443, Bloomington IN 47402.** Buck & Juanita Coulson, artist E. Vartanoff.

3-5—**CzarKon, 1156 Remley Ct., Univ. City MO 63130. (314) 725-6448.** St. Louis MO. Adults only.

17-19—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 251-6226.** Pat Cadigan & some guy named Dozois.

24-26—**Contemplation, Box 7242, Columbia MO 65205. (314) 442-8135.** M. Lackey, D. L. Anderson.

24-26—**MicroCon, % Richmond Hunt, 51 Danes Rd., Exeter, Devon. EX4 4LS, UK.** On-campus con.

MARCH, 1989

3-5—**CaveCon, Box 24, Franklin KY 42134. (502) 586-3366.** At Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY.

10-12—**LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150. (201) 696-9655** The dowager queen of Eastern cons.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon in Boston. $70 to 3/15/89.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $60 to 12/1/88.

30-Sep. 1—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** NASFiC. $55 until mid-1989.

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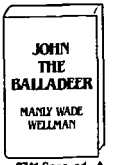

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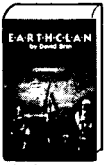

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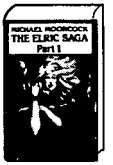

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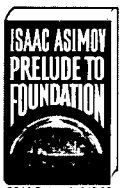

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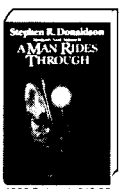

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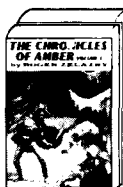

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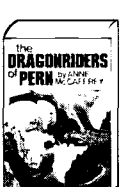

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